Love Stories of the Real West

RANCH ROMANCES

15¢

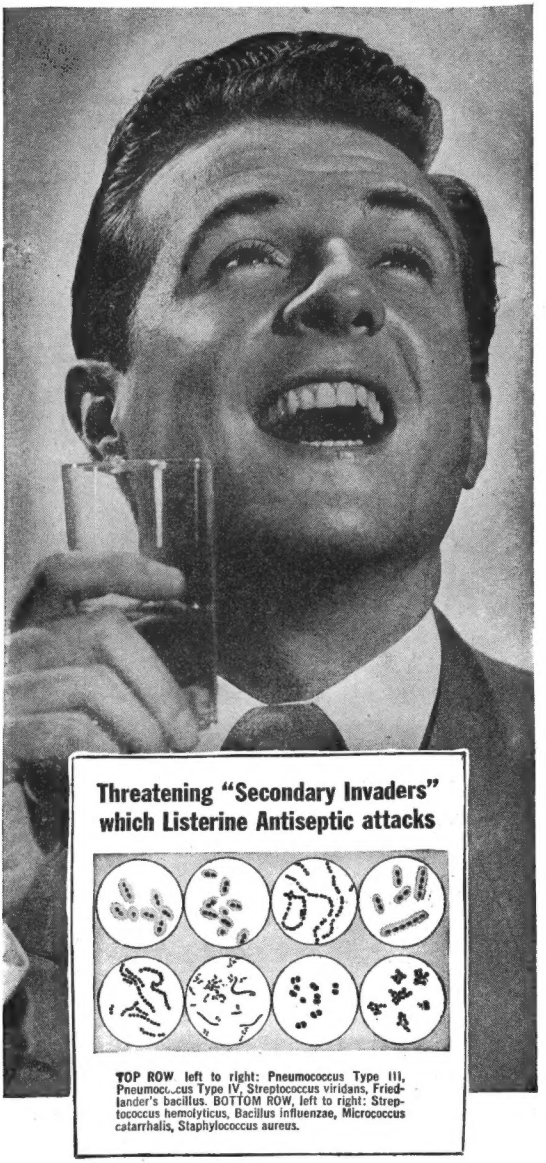
FIRST JANUARY NUMBER

HIDDEN HATE

BY RAY PALMER TRACY

A novelette by
W. T. BALLARD

At the first sign of a COLD...



Threatening "Secondary Invaders" which Listerine Antiseptic attacks

TOP ROW left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus viridans, Friedlander's bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus hemolyticus, Bacillus influenzae, Micrococcus catarrhalis, Staphylococcus aureus.

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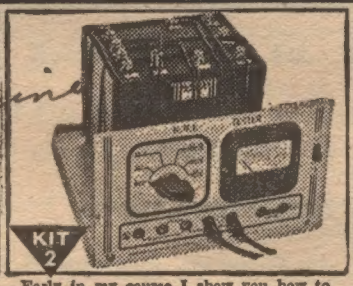

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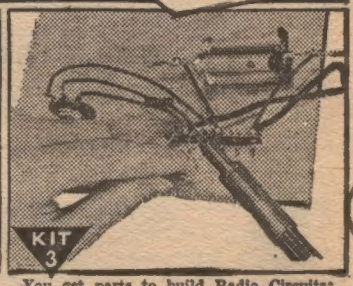

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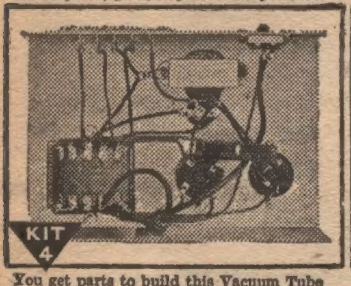

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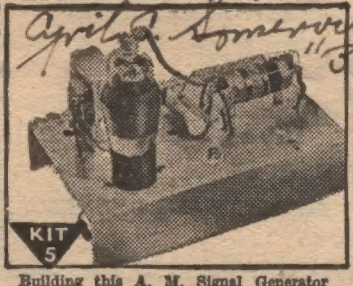

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FIRST JANUARY NUMBER

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RANCH ROMANCES

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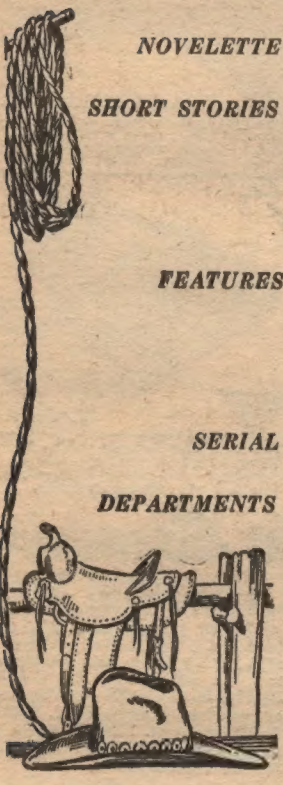

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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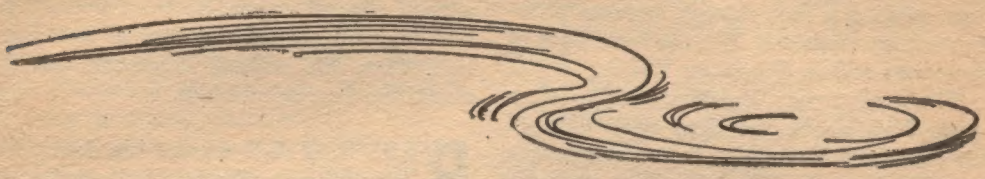
Hidden Hate

by Ray Palmer Tracy

Her arms went around his neck. "Just so you've finally awakened," she said

FOR THE SECOND time, Jeff Wells was framed—but his mysterious antagonist didn't count on Jeff's courage nor on the girl who loved him



KEYSTONE RILEY, evil, dried up little gunslinger, made a deathbed confession. It was not dying grace but revenge that had prompted him to spill the dynamite. He had demanded the full price for a bungled job. A bullet had been his answer.

He admitted it was he who had pumped the bullet into old Rock Sigman that left him paralyzed below the hips. He admitted he helped frame Jeff Wells for the shooting. Unfortunately, before he could quit cursing long enough to name those who planned the killing and frame-up Keystone had a hemorrhage that finished him.

Jeff Wells, after serving six months of a ten-year sentence, was released from the penitentiary. He hardly heard the drone of the warden's voice as he handed out advice. A big blond man with wide shoulders and the slim waist of a rider, he had a grimness in his grey eyes and a set to his mouth that made the warden falter.

Jeff noted a silence and thought he had finished. "Thanks," he said politely, shook hands and turned away.

Jeff picked up his suitcase and went out through the big gate. The warden, watching the powerful figure and the purpose in his stride, thoughtfully scratched his bald pate. "If I lived in Basin City or Sundance Valley and had anything to do with that framing," he murmured, "I'd start hunting cover."

Bert Little, Basin City attorney, was the only man to whom Jeff had written his plans. Bert had been raised by Jeff's father, Empire Wells and Jeff considered him as a brother.

Although only Bert knew how and when he was returning, Jeff didn't overlook the point that the same people who had railroaded him would certainly try to prevent his return. When he boarded the train for Walshburg, the nearest railroad terminal to Basin City, he kept a close watch. He soon suspected a man was on his trail.

The first thing he did after reaching Walshburg was to buy a gun and belt. Within twenty minutes, he proved to his own satisfaction that the man he had spotted on the train, the little fellow with shabby clothing and old hat pulled low over sharp eyes, was carefully shadowing him.

Jeff walked into the stage station. Ad Glanny was running it as usual. Ad shook hands with him. "Glad to see you home again. Want a ticket to Basin City?"

"A one-way ticket," said Jeff, raising his voice just enough so the gimlet-eyed gent who had sauntered in behind him couldn't fail to hear. "And by the way, Ad, I'm going to make a call or two before stage time and wind up at Rex's Pool Hall. If I ain't around when the stage starts loading, phone Rex's, will you?"

"Sure," obliged Ad. "I'll see you don't miss it."

Jeff went out and up the street. Gimlet-Eyes did not follow him. Peering around a corner, Jeff saw him heading for the pool hall. The big cowboy grinned to himself and made a detour to the back of Jack Fuller's livery stable, hired a horse and rode out of town along a back street to the shortcut trail leading over the mountain shoulder to Sundance Valley.

As he jogged along his mind kept going

back to the trial that had unjustly convicted him. Funny thing about the witnesses against him. They had seemed apparently solid cattle buyers. They must have been playing a part though, because afterwards they vanished. Yet the force back of them was still in Sundance Valley.

The trail from Walshburg followed a route high above the deep pass through the Larkspur Mountains to the stockman's paradise beyond. The afternoon sun was pouring golden light over great stretches of country as Jeff got his returning glimpse of the land from which he had been banished. Seemed as though the air was better on this side.

Geographically, Sundance Valley was not isolated. Its rich, rolling grasslands, winding river, many creeks and timbered slopes surrounded by lofty mountains, were only a little away from the traffic.

It was the valley's early, wild history and the legends that had grown up around the great war for power between the Pitchfork and the Diamond outfits that set it apart. In that great early struggle between Empire Wells, Jeff's father who dominated the south side of the river, and Rock Sigman who ruled the north side, all the other valley spreads had been sucked in on one side or the other. Angry lead wrote a page of violence and blood unsurpassed anywhere in the West.

Shrewd and farsighted, both Empire and Rock realized they were treading the road to ruin. A truce was struck which developed into an era of peace that brought them great material gains. But old hates and seeds of revenge die hard. And there are those who will use them for selfish ends. Someone was stirring the old ashes and blowing the smouldering embers into new flames. An unaccountable wave of rustling and criminal depredations struck the valley and the town of Basin City.

While in the penitentiary for a crime he did not commit, Jeff was in touch with the prison's underground system of intelligence. Events in Sundance Valley became prison gossip. Jeff heard news of shootings, wild gambling and disappearing cows. He learned that once again the valley was taking sides for war.

Jeff dropped down from the foothills and approached Basin City. He avoided the main stem and came in on a side street. Turning into an alley, he tied his mount to a post, slipped around to the front of the building and opened the door of Bert Little's office. He stepped inside and quickly closed the door behind him.

BERT LITTLE was at his desk. He glanced up and a startled expression flitted over his dark face.

"Well," grinned Jeff, "ain't you going to say hello to the returned sinner?"

Bert scrambled to his feet, his smile revealing even teeth. He came around the desk with outstretched hand. "I was expecting to hear from you before you showed up," he said. "You gave me a start." He was as tall as Jeff, although not so wide of shoulder. His complexion was almost olive in coloring. Jeff was good-looking in a rugged, square jawed way, but Bert was handsome. He was seven years older than Jeff, who was twenty-four.

"You didn't get my letter?" inquired Jeff.

"You wrote me a letter?" Bert was surprised.

"I wrote you I'd be home today."

"I never got it," said Bert. "Wonder what happened to it."

"It fell into the wrong hands," nodded Jeff, "that accounts for what happened." He told Bert about the man who followed him and how he had dogged him.

"We'll attend to that skunk!" promised Bert angrily.

Jeff asked with assumed carelessness, "Sheila Carson still working at Ben Huber's Merchantile?"

"Listen, Jeff," said Bert. "You ought to treat that girl pretty nice. She seemed to think it was because I defended you that you didn't get free. She's always pestered me to do something about getting you out."

Jeff's face lit up. "She has?" he said. "I didn't hear from her very often and thought maybe she'd forgotten me. Guess I'll drop over and see her."

"You better," advised Bert, "but don't hang around. There're a lot of men in town today from north of the river."

"Probably due to my letter," said Jeff, and went out.

He passed the hotel on his way to Huber's store. Glancing across the street, his eyes rested on what had been the empty Irrigation Project warehouse. The building had been revamped. The familiar, weatherbeaten front was gone. It was now a gaudily decorated stucco affair.

There was deep interest in Jeff's gaze. According to his prison underground information, the Palace of Gold, this new saloon and gambling house of Basin City, had become the center for the lawless element. The news that filtered into the big house had it that Solly Kato, the alleged owner, was only a figurehead for some powerful force back of him.

There were plenty of horses racked in front of the new saloon. The north side brands confirmed what Bert had said and hinted that a welcome had been arranged here in case Jeff got away from the man trailing him.

As he started past Lang's drugstore, the door opened and Ila Sigman came out. Her dark eyes were shining with a light which the long, softly upsweeping lashes failed to curtain.

"You're back, Jeff!" Her delight was frank. "You know neither daddy nor I ever believed you shot him. I'm happy that we both stood up in court and said so."

"Thanks, Ila," said Jeff. "I'll never forget it." His eyes took her in. She was tall and slender, but with firm curves in the right places. Her jet black hair peeped from under her wide hat in glistening ringlets. Jeff had never thought of it before, but it was easy to see why Ila Sigman was famed for her beauty far beyond the confines of Sundance Valley. "How is Rock?" he asked.

A FLICKER of sadness crossed the expressive face. "Keeps about the same. He thinks he'll walk again, but I get a little discouraged over it." Her eyes roved worriedly across the street to the Palace of Gold.

Jeff followed her gaze and saw a lot of strange men congregating in front of the saloon, all looking across at the pair in front of the drugstore. "Seem to be a lot of strangers in town today," he commented.

There was a hint of fear in the lovely eyes. "A lot of hard characters have drifted in lately," she said. "I'm afraid they're in town today because of you. Jeff, please be careful."

"You knew I was coming?"

Ila nodded. "I heard it last night."

Anger made Jeff's eyes smoke. "Who told you?" he demanded.

"I heard our foreman, Dude Trucker, tell one of the hands," she answered truthfully. "Wasn't everyone supposed to know?"

Her honest surprise cooled him. "I only wrote the news to Bert and told him to keep it to himself," he said.

"Then how did anyone find out?" asked Ila.

"Bert never got that letter," answered Jeff dryly.

"I don't see how Dude found out," puzzled Ila.

"Mystery to me," said Jeff. "It looks like I'd better do my errands and get out of here while I'm all in one piece. Something is going on we ain't in on." He went on and up the steps to the loading platform of Huber's store. Pushing open the door, he entered.

Jeff and Sheila Carson had gone together since school days. He had been hurt when she had shown signs of wavering during his trial. While he was in prison, he had received only one letter from her. Yet Bert's saying that she'd been trying to help him gave his heart a lift.

As he entered the store, Sheila was standing against a colorful background of bright prints. She was as tall and beautifully molded as Ila, but was a golden blonde. Her red lips were bent in an inviting Cupid's bow and her eyes were as deep a blue as the sea.

"Why, Jeff Wells!" There was a little trill in her voice. "When did you get in? Why didn't you let me know you were coming?" Her lips were parted, showing the beautiful white of her teeth. She stretched slim hands across the counter to grasp his.

"I sure have missed you and thought

about you plenty," said Jeff, a little tug of disappointment gripping his heart. She was putting on a swell act, but it lacked something. He didn't know what.

"You'll be careful for my sake, won't you, Jeff?" Sheila pleaded, dropping her tone. "There are those who don't want you to come back. Maybe it would be better for you to go away until things settle down, with Solly Kato running the town and everything."

"I'll stick around," said Jeff shortly.

"I knew you would," sighed Sheila resignedly.

Jeff wanted to get away more than he had wanted to come in. "I've got to go now," he said. "I'll be in to see you soon."

"Don't go yet. You just got here," protested Sheila.

Something was definitely wrong, but Jeff couldn't put his finger on it. Somehow Sheila seemed to have undergone a change. Perhaps he had learned something about human nature down in the pen. Reluctantly he admitted that he had seen traits down there that reminded him in some faint manner of Sheila. It was a calculating hardness which lay close beneath that beautiful shell. And no matter how she might deny it, he knew she had lied about being surprised to see him. And why was she trying to keep him there now?

"I'll be in town in a day or so," he said and started for the door.

Sheila ran out and stopped him, "Don't go out the front door," she whispered. "There's a bunch of north side gunmen across the street. I'm afraid for you. Go out the back door."

JEFF LOOKED down on her anxious, upturned face. She made a pleading picture, but it didn't reach him. He was sorry, but something was gone. Then, thinking of Ila's open frankness, he had the answer. Sheila was not playing straight with him. Somehow she lacked sincerity.

"I ain't sneaking out of town," he said and once more headed for the front door.

"You don't care how I feel," accused Sheila. She clung to his arm.

"I walk where I please!" growled Jeff. He removed her hand and went on. He stopped at the door and looked through the glass.

The men across the street were still

JEFF WELLS ILA SIGMAN SHEILA CARSON

watching the front of Huber's store, but he could see no one on his side of the street. That didn't look right. Maybe Sheila was playing square after all. He glanced back at her. Sheila was gone. He caught a glimpse of her hurrying out the back door of the store. "So!" he said.

Jeff fiung open the front door and stepped out on the platform. He was alert in every muscle and nerve. His hand swung close to the new gun he wore. Deliberately he went down the steps to the sidewalk and turned toward his horse.

From between the store and the next building, the telephone office, stepped a tall, slope-shouldered man with exceedingly long arms and slim, quick fingers. Two guns rode his thighs. The murky, granite hard quality of his eyes and the pinched side slash of his mouth combined to picture animated evil.

One glance and Jeff cataloged him as a top gunhand. Since he was a stranger, he must have arrived in the valley while Jeff was in prison. Jeff had no idea who he was, but was certain of one thing. This man must have been waiting out back for Sheila to send him a victim. Sheila had run out to warn the gunman that it hadn't worked.

Fury built up in Jeff. He had been quick-tempered, but prison had taken a lot of that out of him. It wouldn't do to lose his temper in a crisis like this.

"Wait!" The gunman came to a stop and slid the command out of the side of his mouth.

Jeff stopped and looked as confused as he could. "What do you want?" he mumbled.

"So you're boasting around that you're going to get Hank Rexford! I'd like to know what I ever done to you!" the gunman said loudly enough to carry across the street. "Well, whatcher waitin' fer? Now's your chance!" He tensed, ready to swoop for his gun.

An intense listening attitude crept over Jeff. His eyes were filled with intense yearning. Slowly he reached up a hand and cupped his ear. His mouth opened. "Hey?" he boomed in the toneless style of the deaf. "Speak a little louder! I don't hear good!" He supplemented his request by turning his head and taking three quick steps that brought him close to the gunman who hesitated fatally. "What was it you

LITTLE JOE BERT LITTLE DUDE TRUCKER TIM QUILLEN

said?" yelled Jeff, dropping his hand and rising on the balls of his feet.

Wild rage shook the gunman. He had been outmaneuvered in front of a crowd by a trick so simple a child could have seen through it. His prestige was at stake. "I said you was braggin' about gettin' me!"

"You're a liar!" insulted Jeff, deliberately and loudly. "You're one tinhorn I never heard of!"

Rexford bounded back, both hands going for his guns. Jeff had anticipated the move. He leaped right along with the gunman. His right fist came up in a terrific uppercut.

With both hands darting to his holsters, Rexford was wide open. The blow took him squarely on the button, dropped him on his face.

MEN SWARMED across the street. Among them Jeff saw a number of friends and knew the danger was over for the time.

Town Marshall Chuck Gleason came running over. With him was a pot-bellied man with round cheeks, ornately dressed and carrying embossed leather and silver-mounted guns with pearl handles. He possessed the ability of being able to strut standing still.

"You ain't been in town five minutes and you're in trouble again!" Chuck accused Jeff.

"This gunslick's a friend of yours, I take it," said Jeff. "Was you backing him to pick a fight with me and cut me down?"

"What'n-hell you talkin' about?" demanded Chuck angrily.

"What you talkin' about, Chuck?" enquired Cope Reed, an old south side cowman. "This gunslinger come here after Jeff went away. I'll lay two to one Jeff never even heard of him before."

"That's right, Cope," said Jeff.

"Then what was you pushing him into a fight for?" demanded a Diamond hand.

"What's the matter with your hearing?" inquired Cope. "It was Rexford who started the whole thing and you know it."

"Jeff had no business coming back here after what he done," complained another Diamond adherent.

Rexford sat up and felt his jaw. He looked around and suddenly remembered what had happened. Without a word, he got to his feet, crossed the street and disappeared in the Palace of Gold.

The pot-bellied man with Chuck swaggered up to Jeff. "I'm Tim Quillen, the Association man sent up here to see where all the rustled stock in this valley is going and to take care of things generally," he boomed. "Glad to meet you, Jeff Wells." He stuck out his hand.

Because he couldn't avoid it, Jeff shook hands with him. He made no other answer at all. This was the first time he had ever heard of an Association man advertising his identity. Neither did Association men look like this one.

As though in answer to the outspoken question, Quillen's face spread in a condescending smile. "I don't sneak around wearing false whiskers and peeking through keyholes," he announced. "I'm modern, I am. I find the culprits through the use of pure science. I'll solve this little problem neatly. Yes, indeed."

"Think of that!" murmured Jeff.

"What's that you said?" inquired Quillen.

Jeff didn't hear the question. Someone was riding hell for leather up the river into the street. He pointed. "There comes a rider hanging to the saddle horn. God! It's Ned Trine!" Jeff recognized his father's rider and began running up the street with the crowd stringing along behind him.

The spent horse sensing his destination was reached, stopped of its own volition. Jeff grabbed Ned as he slid out of the saddle and eased him to the ground.

Ned looked up with surprise mingled with the pain in his eyes. He said, "Hell's to pay, Jeff. Couple of damned drygulchers cut down on me and Empire out by the big juniper at Juniper Butte. They got Empire. I made it here." His head dropped back from exhaustion.

"Who was it shot you and Empire?" demanded Quillen.

"Didn't see nobody. They was forted up in the west draw," muttered Ned and fainted.

A wiry little man with a brown spade

beard dashed with grey came pushing through the crowd to the wounded man.

Doctor Wheeling knelt beside Ned. His examination was swift. "Get him to my office before he bleeds to death," he ordered.

Jeff and Quillen picked Ned up and carried him across the street to the Doctor's office. The doctor went to work. "Don't see how he made it here," he commented. "I always marvel at the toughness of these cowpokes. Anyone else would die, but Ned will probably make it."

There was no hope of getting any more information from Ned at the minute. Jeff and Quillen left the office.

"We'll get the scoundrels who done this!" rumbled Quillen. "Such things can't go on right under my nose. I won't stand for it!"

Jeff clung to his temper. The man was nothing short of a pest. He forgot him as he saw Sheriff Herb Nickolds already in the street on his big sorrel, gathering a posse. Jeff went over to him.

The sheriff's eyes were wary as he saw Jeff approaching. "Hope you don't hold no hard feelings," he greeted. "I had to take you in on that Rock Sigman shooting, no matter what I personally thought."

"Forget it," said Jeff. "It's my father I'm worried about now. I want to ride with this posse."

Nickolds nodded his grizzled head. "Get your horse," he ordered crisply.

ILA SIGMAN stood at the door of the drugstore and watched Jeff go into Huber's Merchantile. She wanted to cry out and call him back. Couldn't he see that all Sheila Carson was interested in was Sheila, the Pitchfork ranch and the power of the Wells family? She thrust that thought from her, fearing it was born of jealousy. She had loved Jeff since they had been children.

A heavy step on the walk swung her around. Dude Trucker, the burly foreman of the Diamond, practically in complete charge of the spread since Old Rock had been laid up, stood scowling down on her.

Dude was as fancy a dresser as his name indicated. The man was good looking in a bold, dark way. Although old Rock was definitely sold on him, Ila neither liked nor trusted him.

"You trying to get a hard name talking to that jailbird!" Dude demanded.

"Jeff was cleared of the charge against him," reminded Ila.

"Not with people who really know him," denied Dude furiously. "The Wells money wrote that Keystone Riley confession and put it in that crooked gunslinger's mouth!"

"Jeff never fired that shot!" insisted Ila.

"You keep away from that drygulcher!" ordered Dude. "I ain't going to have the girl I'm going to marry associating with back shooting trash!"

"That's nothing to do with me. I'm certainly not going to marry you."

"Yes, you are!" He turned on his heel and went back the way he had come.

Gazing after him in anger and fear, Ila wondered how Dude had known that Jeff was returning to the Valley today. She had overheard him tell the news to Treat Wade, one of the vicious Diamond hands Dude was gradually loading on the spread.

She had kept the news to herself and followed Dude and Treat into town at a discreet distance. It had angered Dude when he discovered she had ridden alone in preference to his company, but she didn't care. She had shamelessly watched for Jeff through the window, and then came out of the drugstore at the moment he appeared.

Despising herself, but unable to tear herself away while Jeff was in Huber's with Sheila, Ila waited until Jeff came out. Her heart stood still during the incident with the gunman, Rexford. She breathed again when she saw friends rally around Jeff.

Glancing around, she saw Dude coming toward her once more. The only way to escape meeting him now was to go on past the gathering around Jeff and go into Huber's. She considered that and Sheila preferable to Dude. Skirting the group unobserved, she hurried into the store.

SHEILA GAVE her a brilliant smile. "Who do you think came in to see me a minute ago?" she cooed.

"Jeff Wells," replied Ila. "I talked with him."

"Oh, yes, I did see you watching for him in the drugstore." Sheila knew Ila adored Jeff.

"I want some of that blue ribbon." Ila ignored the remark.

"This is a much better shade for you," advised Sheila picking up another bolt. "This will look lovely against the black of your hair." Secretly she was thinking that she was better looking than Ila and wondered why Ila was so popular. It was her money, of course. Thoughts about character never occured to her.

Starting with envy years back, the emotion had ripened into a bitter hatred for Ila. But today there was a carefully concealed triumph in Sheila as she smiled at Ila with that fresh warm glow on her lips and in her eyes.

"I'll take the shade I picked out," said Ila shortly.

Sheila got the designated bolt out of the case. Her blond head shone and her eyes were guileless as a sparkling sea. Inside she was disgruntled. She would have loved to have gotten Ila to wear that unbecoming shade of blue.

While Sheila was wrapping the package, Ila noticed a new commotion out in the street. Then she saw old Ben Huber coming in the door. "What's up, Mr. Huber?" she called.

Ben came over to her, his old face wrinkled with worry. "The fat's in the fire," he said. "Somebody drygulched and killed old Empire Wells out to Juniper Butte, and they almost got Ned Trine."

"Poor Jeff! What a homecoming!" Ila's first thought was for him. She looked up and saw Ben watching the misery reflected in her face. She got a grip on herself. She said, "I hope Ned saw who it was doing the shooting."

Old Ben shook his head. "No. Ned didn't see anyone. He barely made it to town."

"Might be just as well in the end," suggested Sheila. "The killers could turn out to be the wrong parties."

Anger put a spot of color in Ila's pale cheeks. "If you're insinuating that the Diamond had anything to do with it, you're wrong!" she said proudly.

Sheila raised her delicate brows. "I wasn't insinuating," she denied. "What gave you the idea I thought the Diamond had anything to do with it?"

Ila sensed the venom behind the honeyed words. No matter what Sheila said to deny it, she had meant the Diamond and all knew it. But Ila could see no profit in talking about it. She went to the door and looked out. Dude was nowhere in sight. Swiftly she went to her horse and rode home.

She dreaded to tell her father the bad news, but she didn't put it off. In the big living room of the Diamond ranch house, Old Dock sat in his wheel chair, his great size accentuating his helplessness, his big hands lying idle in his lap. She put her arm around his shoulders and told what she had seen and heard.

"I WAS AFRAID of something of the sort," he rumbled, his features like carved granite, showing more emotion than he often permitted. "If he don't look

sharp, they'll get Jeff, too. They're after him."

"If we could only do something to help Jeff," said Ila wistfully.

"There's one thing that Jeff could do to spike all guns," frowned Old Rock. "I don't know what's the matter with him. In other things he seems to have good sense."

Ila didn't ask what he meant. She knew. But she hadn't known that her feelings were so plain that her father could read them. "It's just because Jeff is so used to seeing me around that I'm part of the scenery," she defended him.

"It doesn't look like a man could be that dumb," criticized Rock. "But Sheila is good looking and she's got her hooks into Jeff."

"Empire's murder will be laid onto the Diamond," worried Ila, changing the subject.

"Of course. It's intended to show my revenge over being crippled."

"Jeff was cleared," pointed out Ila.

"Not the way I'll be said to be threatening about it."

"Daddy, who is back of this?"

"I wish I could walk long enough to find out!" His great hands hooked.

"Dude is mixed into it some way."

Old Rock frowned. "Don't begin that again. Dude is a good cowman, and he ain't going to bite the hand that's giving him a chance to make real money in commissions."

It was no use. Ila would never make her father see that Dude was planning to own the Diamond.

"What you looking so scared about?" demanded Rock.

"Because I am scared at the things going on," she answered honestly.

"Dude and the boys ought to be able to protect us."

"We'll have to go to Empire's funeral, Dad," Ila changed the subject.

"Yes, we'll have to go," agreed Old Rock. "Dude can drive us over in the buckboard."

JEFF LEFT the sheriff and hurried to get his horse. As he passed the door of Bert's office, he tried it, intending to find out if Bert was going to ride with the posse. The door was locked, As he stepped back he saw a little man watching him. "You Jeff Wells?" the little man asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Little Joe, swamper in the Palace of Gold. I've got a note for you left by that lawyer fella." He jerked his head toward Bert's office.

Little Joe was a wizened character who had shown up in Basin City from somewhere not long ago. He was just one of the drifters of the world. He might have once been a man of importance for a certain air still clung to him.

Jeff read the note. It seemed that Bert had been leaving town to see a client when Jeff had showed up. In the excitement Bert had failed to mention it. He would be out to the Pitchfork tomorrow.

Jeff glanced up to see Little Joe still standing there. Pulling out a dollar, Jeff gave it to him.

The effect was surprising. Little Joe's face began to work. Tears glistened in his pale eyes. "You're a different breed than that damn Dude Trucker," he said. "Dude pays with a kick."

Something made Jeff linger and listen. This little wreck had his pride. Kicking him was overstepping the line. "He's that kind all right," comforted Jeff. "What was biting the ramrod of the Diamond?"

"I was mopping near a table where Dude and them two phony looking miners, Dod Seevy and Beck Fuson, who took over the old Makin Mine at the head of the valley, was talking together. Dude claimed I was trying to listen and to get the hell out of there I warn't doing no such a thing and I told him so. But he booted me just the same, damn him!"

Jeff handed him another dollar. "If you hear anything I ought to know get word to me," he said.

"You can depend on me," said Little Joe with funny dignity and scurried back to the Palace of Gold.

Jeff got his horse and joined the posse for Juniper Butte. He scowled as he saw Tim Quillen had attached himself to the group. The man was the representative of the Association and had to be tolerated. It was a wonder to Jeff how Quillen ever got a job with such a particular organization.

The presence of Jeff in the posse made the others, with the exception of Quillen, uneasy. None but Quillen had anything to say. The Association man talked unceasingly. Jeff shut out the sound with a barricade of his own thoughts. He couldn't realize that he was never again to talk to the strong man on whom he had always leaned. He couldn't grasp that he was now the head of the great Pitchfork interests.

THROUGH THE drone of Quillen's voice a startling fact penetrated. Empire had been cut down at almost the same time an attempt was being made on his own life. It looked like a planned effort to wipe out the Wells family.

For a moment he was filled with black suspicion against Rock Sigman. It was gone in a flash. Old Rock was not that kind of a hypocrite. And there was Ila. Ila

stood straight and steadfast with her face to the light. Then who was turning murderous guns loose in the valley?

To the unthinking, it looked like an open and shut case of the Diamond forces showing their anger and resentment over Jeff's release. The Diamond—not Old Rock anyhow—had never hired those gunslingers. Neither had the Pitchfork. His mind went to the Palace of Gold with grave suspicion.

The posse reached the big juniper at the north side of the Butte. Empire Wells lay sprawled where he had been shot from the saddle. Jeff could not believe it even yet. The rugged old man had seemed indestructable.

Dr. Wheeling soon followed the posse to the spot in his role of coroner. He threw a blanket over the body at the close of his examination. "Never knew what hit him," he gave his verdict.

The posse scattered out to look for sign. Tim Quillen insisted on riding with Jeff. "We're in this together, my boy," he rolled out sonorously. "I and the Association will see you through."

Jeff wished he would ride with someone else, but he had to put up with it. It occurred to him the man might be a phony. Maybe it would pay to look into it.

Remembering what Ned had said, the sheriff made a careful examination of the west draw of the Butte. But the rocks left no sign of the killers.

The posse spread out in a great circle and began a search of every inch of ground. Jeff was positive none would be found. This case hinted of the same master hand that had framed him with the crippling of Old Rock. Jeff turned to the three Pitchfork riders who had joined the posse and whom he had requested to stay with him. "We'll take Dad home now," he said.

"Why don't we take him to town where that crooked Diamond outfit can admire their work?" demanded Phil Bowman, a bitter Pitchfork rider, tears of rage and sorrow sliding down his weathered cheeks.

"And start another war?" Jeff asked.

"They're asking for it."

"I'm plump positive Rock Sigman didn't have a thing to do with this," said Jeff.

"I wouldn't trust that Dude Trucker as far as I could throw a horseshoe with the horse nailed to it," growled Ike Gasoway.

"I feel the same way," admitted Jeff, "but if a war is started, we'll let the Diamond start it."

"You might be the next victim," pointed out Ike.

Jeff's answer was a shrug.

There was no one at the great stone house to greet the returning master but Lu Fong, the grief-stricken Chinese cook who had been a fixture of the house beyond Jeff's memory. On silent feet, he led the way through the hall and opened the door of Empire's room.

THE FUNERAL of Empire Wells was not quite private. Jeff didn't want to exclude old and valued friends from paying last respects. Yet lack of public announcement hinted that those driven through curiosity would do well to stay away.

The small gathering at the ranch house for the brief services and at the hill for the commitment were a partisan crowd. It showed in the unfriendly looks thrown at Rock Sigman, Ila and Dude Trucker, who had driven over for the last rites for Empire Wells.

Jeff made a point of greeting Ila and Old Rock with extreme cordiality. Just as pointedly, he ignored Dude, knowing the manner of man he was.

On the other hand, Bert Little acted as though he considered Dude of the same all wool weave as Ila and old Rock. That didn't please Jeff. Jeff saw Dude drive the Diamond buckboard away over Ila's obvious protest at the abruptness of it.

"I'm not sure," Bert broke into Jeff's thoughts, "that Old Rock don't know something about that drygulching."

"No one would have figgered you thought that way, after listenin' to you laying it on a few minutes ago," grunted Jeff with brotherly frankness.

"You're not a lawyer," grinned Bert. "I thought, if given an opportunity, someone would let a revealing word slip."

"Wasting your time," was Jeff's short answer. "Old Rock and Ila don't know a

thing about it, and Dude ain't talking."

"Listen, Jeff"" said Bert earnestly, "Empire picked me up when I was five, two years before you were born, after both my parents had died. He brought me up as much his son as you are. He gave me an education and set me up in business. I've got the same feelings for him that you have. But I'm older than you. I can remember that last range war. I'll never forget it. Suppose Rock had been brooding on it all these years. It could have changed him."

Jeff was moved by Bert's sincerity. "If I thought Old Rock had a hand in that dry-gulching—" He broke off. "No. He couldn't have," he finished more to himself than to Bert.

"Just keep an open mind. That's all I ask," advised Bert. "I've even wondered if Empire had forgotten the war as much as he claimed, especially the way Rock has been talking lately."

"Old Rock talking?" inquired Jeff.

"I don't know where he got the idea, but Old Rock seemed to think you wanted Ila. According to what I hear, he figgers he raised his daughter for something better than a Wells. It set me thinking."

"I've never give Old Rock grounds for believing I wanted to marry Ila," said Jeff. "I'll bet Old Rock never even thought of it. If he had anything to say it wouldn't be behind my back."

"As I said, Old Rock might have changed with the years."

"Just to clear up the record, I'll ride over to the Diamond tonight and ask Rock," said Jeff.

"You would, you and Empire," grinned Bert. "But come on, we've got to ride into town. We might as well get this estate business rolling. You can ride over and tackle Old Rock after we've got the preliminary papers ready for the court."

NEITHER Jeff nor Bert had much to say on the ride to town. They first went to the doctor's office to inquire about Ned. They found the Pitchfork rider resting easily, but unable to add anything to what he had already told.

"Me and Empire was ridin' along looking for some young stuff that had come up missing around there when a couple hombres opened up on us with rifles. That's all I know."

Jeff and Bert left the office. Jeff stopped and looked toward the Palace of Gold. "I hear that new saloon is some salty joint," he remarked.

"Got a harder name than it deserves," defended Bert. "Solly Koler who owns the place tries to run a decent business. He can't help it if some of the undesirables of the country drift into the house if they've got money to pay for what they get."

"I've heard that Solly don't own the place," suggested Jeff.

"Nonsense! Of course he owns it!" The defense was decisive. "Where'd you hear that stuff?"

Jeff shrugged. "Rumor I heard somewhere."

"Take my word. There's nothing to it. Come over and I'll introduce you to Solly."

The two of them crossed the street and went through the swinging doors of the Palace of Gold.

The front room was big and ornate in keeping with the exterior. The back wall was lined with gambling devices which were being well patronized even this early in the afternoon. A long bar ran the length of the other side and two bartenders were taking care of trade.

On a stool at the lower end sat a man where he could look over the entire room. Bert led the way to him. "This is Solly Koler. My brother, Jeff Wells," the lawyer introduced them.

The man on the stool was not exactly fat, but was plump. He was of medium height and had been barbered so carefully and his hair so particularly arranged that he had an artificial look. His face was creased in jolly lines, belied by a pair of pale eyes that had no stability in them.

Jeff merely said, "I'm glad to meet you," and received a polite murmur in return. Neither offered to shake hands.

"I was sorry to hear about you boys' loss," purred Solly in a tone of oily smoothness. "Empire didn't come in here much, but he was a fine man and well thought of. Have a drink on the house. You both look as though you needed it." Solly signaled

to the bartender, but didn't offer to get off the stool and join them.

"Solly don't drink," explained Bert. "You see he's a pretty stable sort of guy. Not much of a glad hander for this sort of business."

Jeff did not make the comment that was on the end of his tongue. But he was ready to bet that Solly Koler was taking orders from someone. The man was not capable of running a business like this without powerful backing.

SHERIFF NICKOLDS and Tim Quillens came in the door and made for the bar where Jeff and Bert were drinking.

"We saw you go in here," shouted Quillen. "We've come to report progress."

"No use in telling the whole world about it," shushed Nickolds out of the corner of his mouth.

Quillen laughed. "That's the trouble with most law enforcement officers," he criticized. "They go around looking mysterious when they ain't got a thing to go on, and then turn smug when they do pick up a point. The modern way is to broadcast it. I and the Association have had notable success."

"I swear I dunno how," growled Nickolds.

"Mr. Quillen might be right at that," approved Bert.

"Of course I'm right," said Quillen, confidently. "Now we didn't pick up any direct sign of them drygulchers," he went on, "but we got an indirect line on 'em."

"You did?" Bert seemed surprised. Jeff admitted to himself that if Quillen did have anything, he was going to be astonished.

"We found evidence," stated Quillen with loud impressiveness, "that someone is driving stock out of the valley through the mountains to the south of Juniper Butte."

Nickolds gave a reluctant nod. "There's sign there all right," he said. "Quillen found it."

"I'm positive it will lead us to them drygulchers," continued Quillen in his self-satisfied tones. "I told you I and the Association would lay them scoundrels by the heels."

Jeff didn't answer. Out of the corner of his eye, he was watching Little Joe, the swamper. Unobtrusively, Little Joe was sweeping up cigarette butts and scattering fresh sawdust on the floor around a table where four men were playing poker. One of them was Rexford, who had tried to pick a fight with Jeff in front of Huber's.

Turning to Bert, Jeff asked, "Who does Hank Rexford work for?"

"He's been running a game here," said Bert. "But I don't figger he'll last long. He likes publicity. That's why he was trying to get into a fight with you. Thought it would be a feather in his kind of cap. You better look out for him."

"Don't worry, I will," promised Jeff. His eyes were on Little Joe. As the swamper half glanced his way he was sure he saw a sly lid droop. It was a kind of assurance that he was on the job.

Jeff glanced at the three men playing with Rexford. One of them, the one with his back toward the bar, was Dude Trucker. The other two were dressed like miners, but lacked that gravel-grained look of real underground men.

"Dod Seevy and Beck Fuson," Bert named them, noting the direction of Jeff's interest.

The atmosphere of the Palace of Gold irritated Jeff. "Let's get on to the office and go to work," he suggested, breaking into the middle of a speech he hadn't noticed Quillen was making.

AS THEY settled down to work in Bert's office, Jeff asked, "Did you hear what Quillen said about driving cows through the mountains south of Juniper Butte? There's no pass through the mountains to the Mexican border within miles, east or west."

"You mean you don't know of any such pass," Bert corrected his foster brother.

Jeff's right fist came up in a terrific uppercut, dropping the gunman

"I mean there ain't no pass," said Jeff flatly. "I've traveled every foot of that range and so have you. There's no way through. You ought to know that."

"Quillen isn't making it up," reminded Bert. "The sheriff saw the evidence. Maybe we've been underestimating that blowhard Association man."

"Yeah?" questioned Jeff. "If there is evidence and a pass, it would pretty near prove the Diamond was mixed up in what's going on. There would be a straight shoot around Paul Beamer's XL, across the river shallows, around the Butte and then through the mountains. It's just too damned obvious! It ain't so!"

Bert grinned again. "You wouldn't do for a lawyer at all," he said. "You're too set in your ways. Well, let's get busy."

Two hours afterwards, Jeff got ready to leave the office.

"Going over to brace Old Rock tonight, like you said?" inquired Bert.

"Yes. I'll cut across the river after supper." He went out. Before he could walk up the street to the doctor's office where he had racked his horse, Dude Trucker blocked his way as though he had been lying in wait for him.

Thumbs hooked in his belt above the guns he wore low on his heavy thighs, he stared insultingly at Jeff. "You shoot off your mouth just once more about Old Rock planning the murder of your old man and something will drop on you!" he threatened loudly.

Jeff stopped and took a careful look around. There was an audience too well-scattered in strategic places for this to be an accident. Then he caught a reflection in a side window. A man with a rifle was sighting through a hole in a wall across the alley from the window.

This was another attempt to wipe out the Wells family. And this time, the Diamond, as represented by Dude Trucker, was definitely in it.

"Dude!" Jeff spoke even louder than the Diamond foreman, "Anyone who says I've even hinted that Rock had a thing to do with drygulching Empire is a lousy liar! And that goes for you!"

Dude had expected the quick tempered Jeff to fly off the handle and go for his gun. That would put him in the forces of righteousness when Jeff was killed. Having it thrown back in his lap was something different. "You ain't going to make me start a fight, no matter what you say!" Dude covered up and walked away.

"You're the man talking fight, not me!" Jeff called after him and went on to his horse.

It was another close call. If he had reached for his gun a bullet from across the street would have finished him to protect Dude. He felt better when he was mounted and on his way out of town.

THE ROAD made a turn around Pilot Rock, hiding him from the street. Little Joe stepped out and intercepted him. Jeff pulled up and waited.

"Your girl in Huber's store is two-timing you," Little Joe took Jeff by surprise. "Her and that lawyer fella are like that." He held up crossed fingers.

Jeff didn't change expressions, although he wanted to laugh. He didn't believe Little Joe. Looked like the little viper was inventing things to earn his money. "Thanks," he said solemnly and handed Little Joe another dollar. Might as well keep him on the payroll.

"You don't believe me," said Little Joe shrewdly. "You wait till dark and I'll show you the two of them meeting."

Jeff shook his head. "I ain't got time tonight. But keep your eyes and ears open and let me know what goes on." He rode on leaving the swamper staring after him with speculative eyes.

There had been nothing specified as to the kind of information Little Joe was to pick up for him. Jeff smiled to think that Little Joe had taken the romantic angle. Bert's dropping in to see Sheila once in a while was not surprising. He was quite a ladies' man and Sheila was lovely. But Bert's big light had been Ila for a time. Only Ila didn't care for him.

As he rode toward the Pitchfork, Jeff couldn't help thinking about Little Joe. Could there have been something other than a romantic angle to what he had in mind?

Sheila had lied about not knowing he was coming home that day. And he was sure she had had a hand in planting an ambush to dispose of him. That let Bert out. For Bert hadn't known he was coming back, hadn't received his letter. But Little Joe claimed Sheila and Bert were on warm terms. Jeff's eyes stared at the horizon while grim lines creased around his mouth. He shook off the mood. "If a man listened to all the junk he hears, he wouldn't trust his own brother," he said. Just the same there were some peculiar angles to this.

IN HUBER'S store, Sheila watched Ila go out into the posse filled street with a growing sense of power. It had been a long wait, but her time was coming.

When Jeff had been sent to jail, she had felt as though personally robbed. She had just been ready to tie him. Then a chance had presented itself to revamp her ambitions along even more generous lines.

Again an upset had seemed sure when Jeff had been cleared. Even as late as when Jeff came into the store she toyed with the idea of taking him back, but she feared the consequences to herself. No, the new way was the best. Empire Wells was out of the way, and Jeff would not last long in spite of his luck.

"What you licking your chops about?" demanded old Ben Huber. Sheila was good for business. Personally, Huber didn't like her.

Sheila had forgotten that Huber was watching her with his understanding eyes that could be so disconcerting.

Sheila's expression so quickly tinged itself with the tragic, it cleared her of suspicion. "How can you say a thing like that?" she inquired in an abused tone. "The whole valley is on the verge of war."

"I thought for a minute you was looking forward to it," shrugged the old man and clumped down the store.

Sheila stood where she could watch the activity of the forming posse. A small smile made a rosebud of her mouth. She gave her shapely thigh an approving pat. "Little Sheila," she murmured, "you're climbing the ladder fast."

An hour before sunset, Sheila, looking like an exquisite poster advertising what was latest in riding clothes, got her horse from the livery stable and rode south along the shady trail following up Crazy Creek. At a gulch she left the trail, followed a ridge for a mile, dipped through a shallow canyon head and crossed another ridge into a grassy bowl containing a spring and a couple of rustling pines. There she stepped down and let her horse feed while she sat on a rock under the pines, waiting comfortably.

There was a complacence about her that denoted she had reached an important peak in her ambitions. Soon the valley would feel the iron hand in her velvet glove. There were those who would wish they had treated her differently when they were compelled to dance to her music. It was a grand sensation to know that after all these drab years of poverty and humiliation she was coming into riches and power.

Over the ridge above her came a horseman. She stood up and waved. It was not because of any real love for Bert Little that she made the gesture. It was a tribute to his brains and cunning that was lifting them both out of the truck. What a terrible thing it would have been to have been born ugly and with no chance to exert charm over a man like Bert.

The handsome lawyer dismounted. He took Sheila in his arms and held her close. Presently he let her go and stepped back, still holding her hands, his eyes admiring her trim lines.

"Everything set?" she asked.

"If there are no more slips," he said.

"It wasn't my fault that I couldn't hold Jeff in the store longer and make him go out the back door," she took exception. "You ought to know Jeff by this time."

"I know every angle of his mind," said Bert. "He always was that way. You insist on his doing something a certain way and he's sure to do it another. Old Empire, damn him! was the same."

"It's strange Empire should treat you so shabbily in his will," said Sheila. "You ought to have had half of the Pitchfork and the management of the whole property."

"Lot of good it done him to claim my education and setting me up in business

was my share," rasped Bert. "It buried him and Jeff will soon be with him."

"You make him believe Old Rock had anything to do with drygulching Empire?"

"Hell no! I didn't expect to. All I wanted was to get him over to the Diamond tonight. And I've done that."

"How long will it be before we can be married and live in luxury?" inquired Sheila.

"Don't be impatient," advised Bert. "These things have to move exactly right. We can't afford to make any slips that will put even a child wise or suspicious."

Sheila thought that over uneasily. Then, "I still don't see how you expect to get the Diamond as well as the Pitchfork. If Dude marries Ila, that will give him control of the Diamond."

"That's what I intend him to think," said Bert.

"Bert, you're so clever I can't keep up with you. How you going to work it?"

Bert gave a secret smile. Sheila had no idea how clever he had been. "Keep that in mind," he advised her.

JEFF WENT home and ate supper with the crew. It was too lonely at the house and he needed company.

The late dark was gathering by the time he was ready to ride across the river and visit the Diamond. What Little Joe had said kept coming to his mind. There seemed to be no reason why the swamper should tell him about Bert and Sheila unless it had some bearing on the way things were shaping up. He wished he hadn't been so hasty with Little Joe—not that he would stoop to spying on Bert.

It was confusing, though, how Bert had told him about Sheila worrying over him when it was plain that she was doing no such a thing. Then there were the hints of Diamond wrongdoing he kept throwing out. Well, tonight would give him some straight answers. If Old Rock said what he thought he would, Jeff determined to go back and consult with Little Joe.

Jeff forded the river and took the north side highway for several miles. He then turned in a big gate and rode up a lane to a stone house.

The whole layout of buildings looked like a duplicate of the Pitchfork headquarters. Admittedly, Old Rock had aped Empire in many things, "Items I knew Empire had me bested in," he told anyone who asked him. And Empire had aped Old Rock in a like manner. Those two had learned a great respect for each other.

Lights were streaming from the living room windows. Jeff pulled up a moment to arrange his thoughts for the meeting. Then he stiffened. A horse shoe clicked on a stone in the lane back of him. Someone was following him. He heard only that one sound. Whoever it was had also pulled up.

Even Ila didn't know the grounds of the Diamond any better than Jeff. He stepped down, led his horse on the soft turf beside the road and turned through a side gate. In a couple minutes, he had his mount hidden in a thicket of firs by the creek.

Leaving his horse, he circled around back of the house as a matter of caution and listened. There was something ominous in the silence of the place. It stretched his already keyed nerves.

Hugging the building wall so as not to cast a shadow, he inched to the back door. It swung open under his touch. Gun in hand he slipped inside and bolted the door behind him.

Tiptoing through the kitchen, he entered the hall. Again he was impressed by the unearthly stillness that wrapped everything in a soundless mantle. It just wasn't natural. If there was anyone in the house there was bound to be some sort of a sound now and again.

The door was open from the hall into the living room where the light was shining, the only evidence of life. Jeff eased to the door and peered in. The room was in confusion. Chairs were overturned and the table under the hanging lamp was upset. In the midst of the wreckage lay Old Rock, flat on his back. There was no question but what he was dead. Also, he had put up a fearful struggle in spite of his years and crippled condition.

But Rock was not Jeff's first thought as he gazed into the room. Ila leaped to his mind with agonizing insistance. His eyes

searched around the room, but she was not there. Still no sound in the house at all.

Jeff did not rush into the room to examine the dead rancher. He was remembering that click of the stone and shoe back in the lane. It could be that he was supposed to rush in to Old Rock and be caught beside the dead rancher. On the heels of the murder of Empire this frame would stick.

BUT JEFF gave his own peril only passing notice. He had to know what had happened to Ila. In that few seconds as he stood in the hall straining his eyes and ears, it rushed over him what Ila meant to him.

Like a drowning man seeing his life's history pass before his eyes in the few seconds before going down for the last time, he saw the steps in his life and the way Ila had been woven in them. He knew he had been a blind fool. If he had any sense at all, the two families might have been tied so closely no one would have dreamed of starting a war between them. It was up to him to rectify his mistake before more deaths and heartaches were added to the growing list. But where should he look for Ila?

A faint sound in the hall behind him spun him around, his gun weaving.

Crawling toward him on the floor was Ling Hop, the fat old Chinaman who had served the Sigman family for as many years as Lu had waited on the Wells family. The light through the living room door shone on the handle of a heavy knife driven to the hilt, protuding from between the oriental's shoulder blades.

A gurgling whisper came from Ling's blue lips, "I know you come, Jeff. I wait. Three masked fella kill Old Rock and carry off Ila. They think Ling dead. No die till you come." There was pride in the labored tone.

"Where did they take Ila and who were they?" whispered Jeff, stooping over the old man. He didn't touch him. It was of no use. Ling was about gone.

The Chinaman was so long in answering that Jeff thought he had already joined his ancestors. Then a dry rustling issued from his lips. "Dude talk of Makin Mine. You kill Dude!" the rustling ceased.

Jeff straightened up and stood still. Dude had been one of the slayers and kidnappers according to Ling. That was easy for him to believe. Ling had summed it all up in "You kill Dude!"

Little Joe popped into Jeff's mind. Dude Trucker had kicked him because he thought the swamper was listening to his private conversation with Dod Seevy and Beck Fuson and they had bought and reputedly were working the old Makin Mine.

Dude must have taken Ila to the mine. It was the logical thing to do. Jeff had to get out of here and beat them to the old workings.

A sound outside reminded him of the danger in which he now was. Those outside must be wondering what had become of him as they closed in on the house. Maybe they knew he was in the house. He bolted the front door. Careful not to make them creak, he went up the stairs to the second story hall.

The house was so like his own he was as familiar with it as though he lived there. A way of escape had immediately presented itself.

In the upper hall he turned in the door of a bedroom. The window was open. He stood several moments trying to locate moving shadows below, but saw none.

Easing himself out the window to the long sloping roof which led down over old Ling's quarters, Jeff crept back of the low parapet. Half way, a big tree spread branches over the roof.

Straightening up, Jeff was concealed by the foliage. He worked slowly to keep from making noise. Soon he stood on the ground close to the dark tree trunk and concealed by small surrounding shrubs.

A MAN, a moving dark splotch in the night, passed close to Jeff's hiding place and tried the back door. Hurriedly, he returned. He naturally would think the quarry was trapped inside.

A minute later other shadows came out of the wall of black and closed in on the house. It was time for Jeff to move. He crept out of the shrubs and along the back-

yard fence. He circled the vegetable garden to the thicket where he had left his horse.

This was the real test. He had to have his horse. If it had been discovered, he might still be trapped. Gun in hand, he edged into the thicket.

There was a little friendly snort from his horse. Relief shot through Jeff. He went ahead confidently and untied the animal.

He rode down the creek, keeping in the shadow of the trees. Back of him there was a loud knocking at the front door of the Diamond house. A voice shouted, "We know you're in there, Wells! We've got you redhanded this time. You might as well give yourself up!"

It was nothing more than an invitation to come out and get killed. It also plainly advertised as far as Jeff was concerned that this had been a planned trap. Dude had been outside Bert's office when Jeff and Bert had been talking about this visit. He must have overheard and acted accordingly.

Jeff followed the creek to the river and crossed the main stream to the south bank. There was no sign of any pursuit. Leaving the doors locked had been a stroke of genius. The murderers of Old Rock and Ling could see no other reason for the doors being locked than their next victim's attempt to keep them out.

Angling southwest, Jeff struck a trail which cut through the mountain range and passed not far from the Makin Mine. There would be little danger of meeting anyone and he could make fast time.

Lighted only by the stars, Jeff left the trail and cut over a familiar mountain shoulder. He rode down a long slope covered with pines and dropped into a mountain meadow. A feeding horse raised his head and nickered a little greeting, Jeff held his breath. But the call was not repeated and his own mount made no attempt to answer. "People talk too much," murmured Jeff, "but at a time like this a mouthy horse could sure raise hell." No sound came from his horse.

Skirting the meadow, he dismounted near an old stub which could be easily in the dark. A few yards east of the stub he tied his horse in a little depression ringed by pungent cedars.

He returned to the stub. A little beyond he came to a well defined trail angling along the slope. The buildings of the Makin Mine were spread out below him.

THE OLD mine had been a good producer and money maker in its early days of development. But the secondary enrichment had proved disappointing and the vein had finally been cut off by a fault. Thousands had been spent in trying to relocate the vein. Finally the workings had been abandoned. Periodically, prospectors, engineers and even laymen with new theories, took a whirl at trying to contact the vein. The results left some strange shafts, tunnels and drifts.

Dod Seevy and Beck Fuson were doing nothing unusual in making a try. It was Dude's interest in them and Little Joe's comment about their phony appearance, topped off by Ling's dying words, that had brought Jeff to the mine in search of Ila.

The administration house, in fair repair, was where those who tried their luck with the mine usually lived. The building was now dark. Neither did there seem to be activity of any kind going on within the camp. That meant little. Dude and his gang might have come and gone, or they might not have arrived yet.

Jeff used care in entering the camp and in stalking the administration building. He tried the door. It swung open on creaking hinges.

Even in the starlight, with no shades at the windows, he could see the room was empty and unfurnished. He slipped inside. A quick search showed that the kitchen was in use and one room had a couple of bunks. No one was about.

Jeff was completely familiar with the property. As a boy, along with the neighboring ranch kids, he had explored the mine in every nook and cranny. He had a definite place in mind where Ila might be kept prisoner.

Leaving the administration building, he approached the portal of the main tunnel. He used skill and technique he had learned years ago in playing here. He gained the portal and edged into the tunnel without exposing himself. Plastered to the side of the tunnel so no one inside could spot him against the light of the portal, he listened for several minutes. Not a sound came rumbling out to him.

He followed the hanging wall around a turn and once again stood listening, his eyes trying to pierce the stygian darkness. All he could hear was the drip of water from the sweating rocks. Once again he moved forward, keeping track of turns and distance. He was getting close to a drift. Fitted with a door, it would make an ideal prison. The drift was of room size and could be made quite comfortable.

The drift should be about here. His hands felt along the wall for a few yards and then encountered the portal of the drift. It was not fitted with a door. Ila was not there.

JEFF ENTERED the portal. Sheltered, he ventured to strike a match. He saw a number of things at a glance. The room was now being used for a store house for tools and powder. And strangely, there was a cot and blankets at one side. A guard must be sleeping here. Perhaps he was on the right track after all.

He took a quick glance into the main tunnel. There was the answer. Just ahead, the main tunnel was blocked with a padlocked door. Behind that was where Ila must be.

Jeff congratulated himself. He had gotten past the guard through his back trail approach. Hastily he looked for a tool to pull the staple of the lock. He saw a pinchbar by the last of his match and found it by feeling for it. He didn't want to crowd his luck by showing any more light than necessary.

The staple holding the padlock gave away

under steady pressure without too much protest. He pulled open the door, went in and shut the door behind him so nothing would appear wrong at a casual glance.

A disagreeable odor came to him as he went on down the tunnel, but there was still no sound of any life.

The odor grew stronger with each yard. There was no disguising its nature. At last he stopped and without fear struck another match. Before him was the answer to the disappearing cows.

A deep shaft had been sunk at this point in the tunnel. This was where the odor was coming from. No attempt had been made to market the stolen cows. That was why they could not be traced. They were driven to this tunnel, killed and thrown down the shaft to rot. They had a greater value this way than as mere beef.

Jeff thought of Tim Quillen and the evidence he had uncovered south of the Butte. Did Quillen know it was planted evidence? Jeff was not so sure that Quillen was not involved.

This part of the plot to set the Pitchfork and Diamond at each other's throats was revealed. It also tied Dude to it. But one thing was plain. There was no use in looking for Ila at the mine. If she was going to be brought here, it would be to the buildings in the camp. Jeff was reasonably sure now that with help from Ling he had jumped to the wrong conclusions.

It was unlikely that this place was left unguarded for any length of time. The guard might return and find the broken lock. Jeff hurried back the way he had come. Soon he heard pounding ahead of him. He knew what it was. The door was locked once more. A chuckle sounded from the other side as Jeff cautiously tried it.

"Nice of you, Wells, to walk right into a trap that warn't even set for you," jeered the voice of Hank Rexford. "I could have shot you while you was gapin' at my cot, but I don't like to kill anyone. It's ag'in my principles. I'm going to shoot down a lot of rock in front of the door to make sure it stays shut and forget about it. With you and Empire and Old Rock gone, we're settin' pretty. We don't need this sink hole no more."

Jeff didn't reply. What was the use? He had not only failed Ila, but he had failed himself and the valley.

So Rexford was going to shoot down rock to cover the door. Probably the powder was already laid in case of an emergency. Jeff hurried back down the tunnel to get beyond danger of loose overhead rocks jarring down to crush him.

There was a muffled roar. The earth trembled, and then there were the sounds of falling rocks followed by dismal quiet.

ILA TRIED not to notice the black looks from the Pitchfork adherents as she sat in the buckboard with her father and Dude Trucker. They waited outside the fence on the hilltop while their friend and neighbor was committed to his last resting place. It helped to have Jeff say the kind things he did. She didn't pay much attention to Bert Little.

That night, after she had lighted the hanging lamp in the living room, she was surprised to have her father voice her own thoughts about Bert. Old Rock said, "I wouldn't trust that Bert Little out of my sight."

"Neither would I," agreed Ila. "He's too good a friend of Dude Trucker's to be honest."

Old Rock looked at her from under his heavy brows. "Personally," he said deliberately, "my choice after Jeff is Dude."

Little sparks burned in the deep black of Ila's eyes, but she didn't lose her temper. She smiled and nodded. "Maybe you'll get your wish, Daddy," she conceded. "In town yesterday Dude threatened to marry me!"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Old Rock.

"Just what I said," replied Ila. "It was right after I saw and talked with Jeff. Dude didn't seem to think that what I thought about it had any bearing on the subject. He just announced that he was going to marry me and walked off."

"Maybe that was the way it sounded to you," said her father indulgently. "Of course, he was jealous and you have to make allowances."

Some way she had to make her father see what kind of a man he was putting his faith

in! She was arranging her forces for argument when the front door banged open and three masked men came into the living room with drawn guns.

The three were padded, obviously to disguise their real outlines. Light gleamed on the big one's hand. The ruby eyes of an entwined snakes ring glittered. Dude Trucker had forgotten to remove that positive identification tag. Ila spotted the ring instantly and so did her father.

Old Rock knew only one way to deal; the direct way. "Dude!" he roared, "What are you doing in that getup!"

There was a furious silence. The one thing Dude didn't want was to be recognized at this time. But it was done and there was nothing he could do about it. "So you know me!" he gritted. "Well, it will do you no good!"

Out in the hall there was a shrill chatter as Ling burst into speech. His voice cut off suddenly, terminated by a heavy fall.

Ila came out of the trance into which the unexpected event had thrown her. She sprang to her feet. "What have you done to Ling, you cowards?" she demanded and started for the hall door.

One of the masked men grabbed her by the arm and hurled her back in her chair with such force the wind was half knocked out of her.

Old Rock let out a roar of fury. Incredibly, he hurled himself out of his chair and got his great hands on Dude. Dude's gun roared, but the bullet went wide.

In spite of Rock's crippled legs, just by the grip in his hands and the strength in his arms, he began to fight Dude on surprisingly even terms. Table and furniture were overturned as Dude staggered about, forced to carry Old Rock's great weight or be crushed to the floor.

ILA SPRANG out of chair once again to go to the help of her father. The man guarding her tried to shove her back, but she ducked under his arm. She grabbed Dude's hair with both hands and pulled his head back so her father's powerful hands could clamp on his throat.

"Help!" strangled Dude.

A blanket was thrown over Ila's head and she was pried loose from her hold. A gun thundered followed by a crashing fall. Then there was quiet.

Ila struggled desperately. Fear for her father gave her strength, but her efforts were hopeless. She was carried into the hall and tied. Before the blanket was removed from her head, she was carried out on the porch. "What have you done to my father?" she demanded of Dude.

"I didn't do anything," denied Dude.

"He's dead! I heard him fall! You shot him!" accused Ila.

"I didn't shoot him," said Dude. "He was making such a fool of himself, one of the boys got mad and let him have it. We've got to get out of here. You—being a sort of witness—will have to go with us." The speech sounded rehearsed.

Ila didn't protest. It would be useless. This was all part of a plan. She now understood why Dude had been so sure of himself. And her father's stubborn faith in his foreman had cost him his life.

Forced down the steps, Ila was mounted on her horse. There came the rapid drum of hooves in the lane. A rider dashed up to the party.

"The boss was right," he reported to Dude. "He's on his way here."

"Then we'd better get going," said Dude with deep satisfaction. "You know what to do. You go and warn all the others to be sure and let him through before they tip our hand.

"We're all set," came the answer. A ray of light shone on the rider's face. Ila recognized him as Slim Vergie, a hard-faced gunman Dude had taken on last week.

Dude took the lead rope of Ila's pony. The others rode behind, except Slim Vergie, who hurried back the way he had come.

THE LITTLE party went up the valley to a junction of several trails, two of which led over the border and one to the Makin Mine. There the party stopped and Ila was blindfolded. When they went on, after her horse had been turned around several times, she had no idea in what direction she was headed.

Ila was sure her father was dead. He

had died trying desperately to rectify the mistake he had made about Dude. The thought was driving her mad. She wrenched her mind away from that angle. Who was on his way to the Diamond?

The answer was obvious the moment she considered it. No one but Jeff could cause such a flurry. And Jeff would find her father dead when he came. Fright took her. Jeff was going to be caught with her father —framed again. She nearly screamed accusations at Dude, who was now riding beside her.

She caught herself. Of course she wasn't supposed to know about this development. To tip Dude off would make it impossible for her to do anything about it.

The group came to a halt again. A gag was thrust into her mouth. Once more they moved on. She heard the swish of water. They were fording a stream. It could be one of the creeks at the head of the valley. Then, clear and distinct, not far to her left, she heard the hollow thumps of a shod horse crossing a bridge.

Dude began talking to her. "Lean forward," he said. "We're going up a trail soon as we get across the crick. It's pretty dark here in the timber. You better keep your head down." Through his talk she was listening to the horse crossing the bridge. Then the sound ended, and her mount went up a steep slope where brush switched at her legs.

Dude had failed again in putting over a deception. The party was not on its way to the Border nor to the Makin Mine. There was only one bridge in the valley of the length she had heard the horse cross. That spanned the river just above Basin City. She was being taken to town, while the impression was being planted that she was somewhere else.

The river had been forded to avoid the bridge. Then some rider had crossed the bridge in time to give its presence away.

"You'll be comfortable enough here at the old mine camp until we have time to cross the border," said Dude. "Then, soon as we're married, we'll come back to the Diamond."

The party came to a halt. Ila was lifted from the saddle and taken in a cabin. She was forced down on a bunk and tied there. There was quiet confusion in the room. Then horsemen departed.

Ila heard at least two men moving about. One spoke in a voice she had never heard before. "How long you figger it will take Dude and the others to establish an alibi?" he asked.

"S-s-sh!" slushed the other. "Come outside to talk."

Ila heard no more, but it was enough. Dude and his gang of thugs were showing themselves in Basin City. They would claim that everything was all right when they left the Diamond.

A short time later, a rider rode rapidly to the cabin and stopped. There was an excited conference just outside the door. Something had evidently slipped.

The men came back in the cabin. Across the room a sort of minor struggle was taking place. There was threshing about and animal grunts of fury. The sound receded toward the door.

A minute later, Ila was untied from the bunk, carried out and once more mounted on her pony. Again the journey began.

Now she knew where she was, Ila sensed that the party was making a roundabout trip around Basin City. She had no idea what part of town she was in when she was taken from her horse and carried up stairs into a building. Again she was placed on a bunk and tied. Then she was left alone.

JEFF WAITED until there were no more sounds of falling rocks after the blast. Then he kept on down the tunnel to the old shaft. He didn't need a light to know when he had reached it.

At the edge of the shaft he halted and lighted one of his few remaining matches. He nodded his head in confirmation of what he had expected to see. The rock ledge around the back of the shaft was still there. Lighted by his match, Jeff reached it before the flame burned his fingers.

As he had done many times when a boy, he inched across the narrow shelf and crept out the other side. He was still carrying the pinchbar, something he had a hunch he was going to need very much.

Straight ahead of him another drift took

off the main tunnel. A narrow fissure of ore had been followed in the vain hope that it would lead to the lost main vein. The fissure had been followed until the ore had given out and the fissure had widened into a crack that led out to the face of a bluff.

Jeff and Pink Colling, a neighbor boy, had discovered that they could creep along the crack, turn upward and climb to the top of the bluff, like going up a chimney. They kept their discovery to themselves. And to make sure that no one learned the secret of their mysterious disappearances and magical reappearances, the two boys had walled up the mouth of the tunnel where it branched off.

Reaching the back of the main drift, Jeff lighted another precious match. The apparently careless pile of rocks concealing the opening were still where he and Pink had placed them years before.

Jeff pulled away the top ones. The tunnel was open beyond. Creeping in, he found the tunnel a much tighter fit than when he was twelve. Seemed as though the dimensions had sadly shrunk. It was a tight fit and in most places he had to stoop. He began to worry about the crack in the bluff. That had been a tight fit in one spot, even when he had been twelve. How was he going to get past that spot?

There was a faint glimmer ahead where the starlight was seeping in. Now he came to the end of the tunnel and pushed out into the crack. He experienced no difficulty until he was half way up, his hands and feet going automatically to the places they had not sought for so many years. Then the crack narrowed. His shoulders stuck.

Jeff scratched another match to look around. He saw no hope—trapped within sight of freedom. But in the light's feeble ray, he saw that the rock was now cracked along the bottom. It hadn't been in the old days.

Bracing himself, he stuck the sharp edge of his pinchbar in the crack and pried. There was no other way out, so he kept at it.

He stopped to get his breath. If only he could find the proper place to get leverage! He thrust his arms up through the opening over his head and stuck the pinchbar in the crack he knew was there. He swung on it with all his weight and thought he felt it give.

It wouldn't do for him to be caught in that position. He would be swept away with the rock and crushed. He crept from under it. He had only a couple matches left, but he lighted one of them.

The crack at his end of the rock had widened since his first look at it. He thrust the pinchbar in the crack and threw his weight against it.

So suddenly it almost swept him away, the mass let go and dropped. It wedged, not many feet below, blocking the route back to the tunnel. His only way out now was straight up.

AS SOON as the rock particles stopped falling, Jeff lighted his last match. The breaking rock had left a smooth surface for at least five feet. It was wide enough for passage. In fact, it was too wide and there were no handholds.

Jeff's eyes went to a little ledge he remembered winding up to the top. It was tantalizingly out of reach. He wondered if he could leap accurately enough from his precarious footing to hook the curved end of the pinchbar over the shelf and scramble up. If he missed, he would fall a good hundred feet to a narrow part of the crack.

He didn't dare think about it. This was his one chance to escape. He raised the bar in one hand and the fast burning match in the other. Carefully he measured the distance before the match burned out. He raised his other hand and grasped the bar, his mind still seeing the edge of the shelf.

Gathering himself, he sprang upward and thrust the pinchbar into the darkness. It caught, and he swung like a pendulum suspended over death on the rocks below.

Working with care, he inched up the bar until his fingers grasped the rock shelf. A sharp struggle and he was on the narrow shelf, plastered against a wall that seemed almost to shove him off.

Using the pinchbar as a feeler to make sure that no breaks had taken place in the shelf during the years since he had trusted his weight on it, Jeff worked his way upward and finally lay panting on the top of

the bluff. Once more he was a free man.

Keeping well back from the face of the bluff, so he could not be seen against the skyline, Jeff made his way back down to the camp. He found no signs of Hank Rexford, and the horse, which had been in the meadow, was gone.

A short search showed the old camp to be deserted. It had served its purpose, and now Rexford was probably on his way to report to his chief.

Jeff got his horse and rode down the trail by which he had arrived. One thing was to his advantage. Rexford would think he was safely out of the way and so would all the others. There was going to be a shock when he suddenly appeared. It could give him an advantage that might spell the difference between life and death.

As he rode along, Jeff wondered if Dude was capable of such a scheme. He didn't believe he was. Reluctantly he considered Bert Little. The whole set up had the stamp of Bert's cleverness on it.

IT WAS around one thirty in the morning, and the darkness was black and still. Jeff rode around to the back of the hotel and slipped in the back door.

It was easy to get up the rear stairs without being seen. In the hall above, he tried the door of the room Bert Little rented. It was locked.

A pass key would unlock any door of these country hotels. Jeff took one from his pocket and slipped it in the lock. There was no key inside, advertising that door had been locked from without. Confidently he unlocked the door and went in.

The shade was drawn and the room had the feel of emptiness. Knowing the lay of things, he went to the stand and got matches. There was no one around and the bed had not been occupied. That didn't look so good for Bert.

Jeff didn't waste time looking for anything. All he wanted was to know if Bert had been in bed while the excitement was going on.

Filling his pockets with matches, Jeff left the room and returned to his horse. His next port of call was Bert's office. Taking the pinchbar and leaving his horse handy for a quick getaway, he went into the alley that led past Bert's office.

Everything was quiet and no lights showed. It was unlikely that Bert would be near his office. And in that office, Jeff thought he might find something to prove or disprove that Bert Little was mixed in this business.

The door would be locked. Anyhow, Jeff didn't dare show himself in the street. The window of the private office opened on the alley. It was locked, of course, but Jeff's pinchbar broke the lock. The sash slid up and Jeff was quickly inside. He closed the window after him. The shade had already been drawn.

He stood listening. The only sounds that came to him were the echoes of revelry up at the Palace of Gold. He scratched a match, lighted a bracket lamp and set it back of the heater, so the light wouldn't shine on the window shade.

Jeff didn't know what he expected to find, but suspicion was forcing him to act. Probably anything valuable would be locked in the safe. He stood irresolute, wasting time he should be using in a hunt for Ila. But he had no idea where to hunt. Something here might put him on the track.

He got down the file marked W and

swiftly leafed through the Wells papers. All innocent enough. He looked for a Sigman file and drew a blank. Next he emptied the contents of the wastebasket on the floor and went through it. Evidently it had been cleaned the day before. It seemed disloyal to one who had been raised as his brother, but he was looking for signs of the letter he had written announcing his arrival.

The only envelopes showed the postmark of that day. His eye fell on the stove. It was warm weather; perhaps the fire hadn't been lighted for some time.

Another disappointment. Papers had been burned there within the last few hours. He thrust his hand into the welter and stirred the ashes. His fingers encountered a paper not burned, only scorched. This he drew out and turned over in his hands.

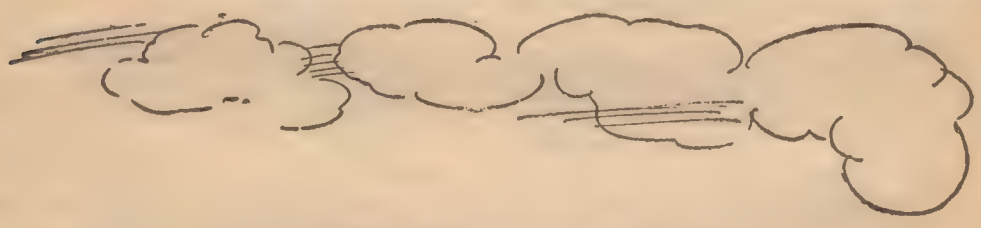
IT LOOKED to be some sort of a bill but was so badly scorched it was hard to make out. There was an amount for several hundred dollars. But one thing was clear enough. That was *OK S. Koler,* written in scrawling letters across the bottom.

Jeff went to the files and drew out the one marked K. There, in an all but empty space, he found something that had been brought by today's mail, according to the postmark. There were two letters in envelopes addressed to Solly Koler with a notation on both of them that would have convicted anyone connected with them.

There was no chance of a mistake. The mysterious owner of the Palace of Gold was Bert Little.

Shocked, and more hurt and bewildered than angered, Jeff stared at the damning evidence in Koler's handwriting on papers that no one but the owner could have in his posession. He had always considered Bert as a blood brother.

The first reaction was followed by one of mounting rage as he traced Bert's despicable course. Empire Wells had picked Bert up and educated him, treated him like a son. This was the sort of gratitude Bert was showing. It was Bert who had fomented the trouble in the valley, framed his foster brother, murdered his benefactor and Old Rock Sigman and now had kidnaped Ila. No telling what else he had plotted.



Coming in the next issue

RANGE TERROR

A Novel of Eager Romance and Swift Justice

By MARIE DE NERVAUD

Little Joe had given him the key when he reported that Bert was playing around with Sheila. Now Jeff knew why he had sensed Sheila was lying when she had said she didn't know he was expected home. The letter to Bert had not been stolen or lost. Bert had received it and set a trap for his reception. It explained how Empire happened to be cut down at that particular time.

It was Bert he had to thank for what he had found at the Diamond, for his trip to the mine and his escape to Basin City. And Bert knew where Ila was, even if Dude Trucker was with her.

Bert Little was playing for big stakes, the vast holdings Empire Wells had built up through the years and left to his natural heir. With that heir out of the way, a smart lawyer like Bert with his foster son status would gather in the prize.

"If Keystone Riley had lived another five minutes, Dad and Old Rock would still be alive," reflected Jeff with bitter regret. "Keystone was about to name that skunk."

Just where did Dude Trucker fit into the scheme? The answer to that was easy once he had Bert's position pegged. Bert had to have the backing of a powerful outfit to carry his scheme through. Dude Trucker with his influence at the Diamond was a natural partner for such an enterprise.

Everything left Jeff's mind but one thought. He had to get Ila. Now he knew who owned the Palace of Gold, he had more than a hunch that Ila was there.

He put the incriminating papers in his pocket, extinguished the light and put the lamp back in its bracket. A careful look outside and he slipped out the window, lowering the sash behind him.

Thoughtfully he moved his horse to a more advantageous spot in case it was needed for a quick getaway. Moving quietly through the dark, Jeff approached the back of the building. It had once been the Irrigation Company warehouse and had the one-time manager's living quarters overhead.

As yet, the living quarters hadn't been needed in the business of the Palace of Gold. Supposedly they were empty. Jeff was sure that that was where he would find Ila.

THIS WASN'T going to be easy. He had to get inside the building and find the way above without being seen. That ought not to be impossible for the ghost Bert and Dude must believe him to be. That fact should relax the guard.

There was no way to get to the rooms above without entering from the lower floor. The upper windows were heavily shuttered. Jeff saw no use in putting it off. The jimmy he shoved through his shirt at the armpit, where he let it dangle, concealed by his arm. Pulling his hat low, he went to the back door. It swung open under his touch. At the moment, no one was in the hall leading to the main room.

To his left he saw a new enclosed stairway with a padlocked door shutting it in. Jeff figured he would never have a better chance. He took the pinchbar from under his arm, thrust it through the lock staple and heaved. It came loose with a loud, protesting squeal that seemed to penetrate the rumble of talk, laughter and the droning call of the gamblers in the big room up front.

"What the hell was that?" demanded a voice back of a door opposite the stairway. It was a private card room.

"Banshees wailing over my luck," rolled out the cheerful tones of Tim Quillen. "Little Joe, fetch us all a drink and see if it'll change things."

The laugh that followed at Quillen's expense drove away any thoughts of the squawling staple. Jeff, standing on the lower stair with the door swung shut and his gun in his hand, forgave Quillen for his stupidity. That big mouth had a purpose after all.

Little Joe came out of the card room. He did not pause in the hall, but went on to the bar. Jeff, made his way up the stairs to the floor above.

The heavy construction of the building was at once evident. Only faint sounds of the activity below floated up to him. Otherwise the silence was deep as the darkness itself.

It seemed to the cowboy that every place he had gone this night he had been greeted by just such a thick silence. But what silences they had all turned out to be!

He stood thinking a minute. The logical

place to hide anyone would be over the storeroom, where no sound from above would attract attention. That would be in the bedroom to the left of the head of the stairs.

With caution he felt along the wall until he reached the door. Although no light showed around the door, he turned the knob and shoved and light streamed into the hall. His gun in one hand and the pinchbar in the other, Jeff took a swift stride into the room and shut the door behind him.

The room was unfurnished save for a stand on which the lamp sat and a cot in the corner on which Ila lay bound, gagged and blindfolded.

JEFF STRODE to the cot. He laid his pinchbar on the floor by the bed and got out his knife. He slashed the bonds that held Ila and removed the gag and blindfold. Gently he began chaffing the circulation back in her hands while she struggled for speech.

"Oh, Jeff, you did come!" she managed. "How did you find out about Dude? And what happened to my father?"

"Touching little scene!" said Bert Little from the door.

Jeff had been so concerned with Ila he had forgotten his caution. He straightened and whirled around, his hand starting for his gun, but Bert had him centered.

"Go ahead and try to draw," suggested Bert, his black eyes murderous. "I've had enough bungling in getting you out of the way. Now I'm going to attend to it myself!" Slowly he came a couple steps into the room.

"What a skunk you turned out to be!" said Jeff recklessly. "I'd never have believed you could be so damned crooked and cold-blooded!"

"You always was a fool! Just like your old man!" mouthed Bert, the veneer dropping away and leaving the unprincipled crook unmasked. "Move away from that cot, and be mighty careful about it."

Jeff sidled away toward the other side of the room. Bert was getting him away from Ila and the lamp, both dangerous factors, as he well knew.

"I tried to spare you all this, Ila," Bert placed the blame for this situation. "But you wouldn't listen to reason when I offered to take you up years ago. Did you think you could turn me down for this clod of a Wells and get away with it?" Bert didn't take his eyes off Jeff, who was praying for a split second of inattention.

"You killed my father!" accused Ila.

"I haven't killed anyone yet," denied Bert. "All I'm going to do is to snuff out the last of Jeff's nine lives. His luck has run out."

"You think I won't tell everyone I see?" demanded Ila, "that I'd let my father's murderer go free?"

"I said I didn't murder your father. That was Slim Vergie. And it was Slim and Rexford's brother, Jack, that got Empire and Ned. I don't mind telling you this—a man should have no secrets from his wife. And after we've spent a Mexican honeymoon, you can come back and try to convince anyone I've killed any of these pests."

"How many of you crooks do you think I can marry?" jeered Ila with a courage that made Jeff want to cheer. "Your pal, Dude Trucker, has already given me notice of our engagement. What makes you so slow in cramming my engagement to you down my throat?"

Bert Little's colossal conceit could not stand ridicule. "I'll soon make you sing a different tune than that!" he snarled. "The way to get along with me is to use your head! As for that fool, Dude, I let him think he was going to marry you and take over the Diamond." He laughed with real enjoyment over the cleverness of it. "Why, he's as weak in the head as Jeff. I'm through with him."

"Going to kill him, too?" inquired Jeff. If he could only keep Bert talking he might get a chance.

Bert was taking a sadistic pleasure in taunting his helpless prisoners. He didn't like Ila's learning more than he had intended, but it made no real difference.

"Why kill him and run risks?" Bert raised his brows. "I've fixed it so he'll destroy himself. Well, I haven't got all night. There are lots of things to attend to." His finger began to tighten on the trigger.

SHEILA WENT for her evening ride as usual. She used great care in fixing her golden hair and making sure that her delicate brows were smooth. Her riding breeches were neither too tight, nor too sloppy. They concealed and revealed just enough. The same was true of her white silk shirt with the pearl buttons, reflecting irridescent light like wavelets of the sea. The pure blue of her eyes, however, held a restrained excitement. The time was here.

At the livery stable she got her horse, while a couple of cowhands admired her at a distance. She had held everyone at arms length. No sense in letting herself get common like Ila Sigman who kidded with all the boys. It was going to be funny to see the popular Ila get netted by Dude Trucker, a man she despised.

That set her to wondering about what Bert was going to do about Ila and Dude. He had some plan to eliminate them from the scheme of things. She did not doubt that. Bert was really clever. Of course he wouldn't take a chance of telling anyone, not even her.

Sheila could understand that. There were things she hadn't confided to Bert about her own planned share in this enterprise. Bert might object, but what could he do once she got a legal hold on him? She smiled so that the stable man might think she were an angel—if he hadn't watched her for years.

Fully conscious of the picture she made, Sheila swung gracefully to the back of her mount and took a new route to the old meeting place. This should be the last time for secret meetings. It was getting tiresome waiting for the great day of emancipation being promised her along with Bert's ardent love.

Today she was a little nervous. There had been a new note about Bert at that last meeting. He was not his usual self. It seemed as though he was slipping away from her, although she couldn't put her finger on a thing.

She went over the plan as outlined, but could see no flaws in it. Perhaps his statement about disposing of Ila and Dude worried her. Maybe she was squeamish after all. She smiled at the thought.

A nostalgic feeling suddenly possessed her. For a moment she wished Jeff had never been framed into the penitentiary and that she was going ahead with her plans for the Pitchfork. One knew where Jeff stood. He nailed his opinions and intentions up in plain view and then hung around to defend them.

It was only a momentary weakness which she quickly shook away. Bert was far more clever than Jeff and he would go much farther in life. Even the governorship was not beyond his reach once he got the financial power of the Pitchfork in his hands. The Diamond, too, would dance to his tune. Bert had as good as said that he had that worked out.

SHEILA swung her horse from the trail up Calf Creek, over the little ridge that separated it from Broken Gulch. On the crest, she paused long enough to look back and give the impression she was enjoying the view.

The stretch of country under her searching eyes was devoid of riders. No one was following her. That was another thing she didn't like—this zigzagging around to make sure her meetings with Bert were unobserved.

Passing Broken Gulch, she reined over the heading and down a long ridge that turned in a half circle. Entering a band of timber, she swung around the rest of the arc. She was now on the other side of Basin City from which she had started. Five minutes later, she was at the old trysting place in the grassy bowl.

Bert was not there. That didn't worry her as he seldom arrived until sometime after she was seated on the rock. It would look peculiar if they started out at the same time. Folks would soon put two and two together. And Bert had the perfect excuse that he was riding out to the Pitchfork.

It was getting much later than usual and she began impatiently to watch the ridge where he always appeared. Something must have held him up. She really didn't begin to worry until the sun was only rim high and the long shadows were heavy in the bowl.

Suppose something had gone wrong at

the last minute. She thought of Jeff and how he always seemed to be riding at the head of the parade. Appreciation of him was coming to her. Again she shrugged the weakness away. Bert was a better bet to gamble her life on.

Rapidly the light faded, and the stillness of a windless mountain night crept over her like a cold garment. It was dark in another half hour. Reluctantly, she admitted to herself that for some reason Bert was not coming. She wondered whether it was an unavoidable delay or not. Perhaps because he was such a kindred spirit, she did not entirely trust him. Then the things she knew about him came to bolster her courage. Let him dare to try and pull a fast one on her!

No use in waiting longer. She swung up on her horse and sat a moment. Perhaps she had better ride back by the route he usually took in coming. It was possible he had been delayed. In that case she would meet him.

Up on the rim of the bowl she drew rein and listened. Not a sound came up from below and her eyes could not penetrate the darkness. Sheila shivered. The bowl back of her seemed a friendly place by contrast to the trail ahead. She wanted to turn back, but she had to go ahead. The die was cast and there could be no retreat.

She surged her pony and began the descent through Ruby Canyon to the open mesa below. She strained her ears to hear an approaching rider, but there was only the ringing steps of her own mount echoing in the narrow gorge.

AT THE POINT where the canyon gave out on the mesa, she rounded a sharp bend. Her heart gave a little jump. Relief swept over her. Outlined in the dark was a waiting horseman. Bert had heard her coming, of course. Then, a smothering blanket was thrown over her head, and she was dragged, struggling and fighting, from her saddle to the ground.

There were two of her captors. Her hands were drawn behind her and tied. The blanket was removed and a blindfold placed over her eyes. A gag was thrust into her mouth, not that she would have said anything. Both fear and a sense of disaster were keeping her silent.

In some manner Bert, the clever, had slipped. Maybe someone of those he had been compelled to trust had ratted on him. These must be Pitchfork men. If they thought they could find out anything from her, let them try! Now that she was faced with certainty, her courage rose high and determined.

Her captors seemed to have no need for conversation. They went about the job as though every move had been rehearsed. Sheila was lifted back on her horse and tied there. She heard the two men mount. One was ahead of her and the other rode behind as they moved out.

Sheila was a little proud that she had kept her head and not threatened them with reprisals by Bert Little. She wouldn't admit ever having held more than a casual conversation with him no matter what proof and pressure they used. She had to see this thing to the end.

The riding was uncomfortable, but it was bound to end soon. Probably she was being taken to the Pitchfork. That would add a little touch of humor when the real day of reckoning came! This was only an uncomfortable incident on her way to power, she assured herself.

At last they stopped and she was lifted from her horse, carried into a building and tied on a bunk. She didn't know where the cabin was. At least it was not the Pitchfork headquarters. It angered her to think anyone would dare not give her the best, even as a prisoner.

There was a shifting around among the men gathered at the cabin. Some rode away, others stayed. She was uncomfortable and the gag nearly drove her crazy. It was to be hoped this was not going to continue for long. When she came into her own, someone was going to suffer for this!

A little later more riders came to the building. Maybe now she would find out what this was all about.

Heavy steps came into the room. Subdued voices spoke. She identified Dude Trucker's voice. That was wrong. Someone else was being tied on a bunk across the room. Inadvertently someone mentioned

Ila's name. Something was definitely wrong. Dude Trucker supposedly was being led by a leash in the hand of Bert Little. He must have got wise that Bert was not playing square with him. It was Dude who was back of her capture.

Some of the boys departed. A moment later she was loosed from the bunk and urged toward the door. In her fury she struggled and tried to cry out. Roughly she was dragged out of the building and lifted to her horse. Once more she was setting out on a journey. What was to be her destination?

EVERY MINUTE after the first half hour Sheila expected the cavalcade to stop and she would find out what the score was. There seemed to be only three of them. Maybe one guard was taking both her and Ila to some hideaway. She couldn't understand it at all.

They crossed a mountain pass and then Sheila knew they were in the desert. The smell of it was familiar. It was unreasonable. Could it be she was being doublecrossed by Bert Little? No. He wouldn't dare do that. This was some scheme of Dude Trucker's concocted to trade with Bert.

Sheila's worry deepened. Bert didn't think enough of anyone other than himself to make her a bargaining prize. She hoped Dude wouldn't try to bear on.

Weary in every bone, the dust of desert travel grinding into her skin, Sheila sensed that they were once more coming to watered country. Then she heard a creek running.

Progress stopped and hands plucked her from the saddle. She was urged into a cool room and forced to sit on a hard chair. Every one went outside and left her there. She could do nothing more than sit still and wait helplessly.

The drone of voices drifted in to her, but she couldn't make out what was being said. Riders left the cabin. She could hear their horses going back into the desert. Men came into the room. There was the musical jingle of their spurs.

The slide of a lantern globe went up with a little protesting screech. A match was struck. Sheila could see the light around the edges of her blindfold. A moment more and the gag and blindfold were removed.

Sheila blinked in the light of the lantern. Three Mexicans stood regarding her with unwinking eyes. "Where's Dude Trucker?" she demanded.

The broad face of the leader was expressionless as he shook his head. "I don't know him," he replied in good English, but with a tone that carelessly denied he was telling the truth.

"It was Dude Trucker who had me tied up and carted across the desert like a sack of meal!" blazed Sheila, intending to set this Mexican back on his heels with her display of knowledge.

"Surely, *senorita,* you don't expect me to admit that?" inquired the Mexican with vast surprise. Then he brought her a drink of water.

Shortly afterwards, Sheila heard another horse approaching. Then Dude Trucker came into the cabin. His eyes fell on Sheila. He stopped and stared. Blood purpled his cheeks and his black eyes glowed with a fury that both frightened and puzzled Sheila. "You!" he exploded. "How did you get here?"

"You ought to know!" Sheila shot back at him bitterly. "You were with the outfit that took me to the cabin back in the valley."

Dude didn't deny it. He stood regarding her with the fury of frustration, but not actually seeing her. "It's that damned Bert Little!" he burst out. "He's doublecrossed me! He's switched you for Ila on me!"

The answer to Sheila's strange misfortune was contained in that statement. In those few revealing words she learned that Bert Little had never intended to marry her. He had cultivated her for this purpose from the beginning. It was his intention to take both the Pitchfork and the Diamond and toss little Sheila and Dude aside.

"Doublecrossed you!" she jeered at Dude contemptuously. "How about me? Maybe Bert Little thinks he can palm something like you off on me. You might do for Ila—not for me! Wait till I get back to the valley!"

"You can go back to the valley, if you wish," said the Mexican. "But not now.

You have just come to our lovely Mexico. You and the *senor,*" he bowed to Dude, "must be guests of our hospitality for at least a couple of weeks!"

"A couple of weeks!" repeated Sheila. "We wait a couple of weeks and we never can go back! We must go now!"

"I'm sorry it must be this way," regretted the Mexican.

"I'm damned if I stick here a couple of weeks!" shouted Dude furiously. His hand flashed down.

"Hold it!" snapped the Mexican. "Take a look around!"

Dude obeyed. Three steady guns were covering him. He didn't have a chance. His hand dropped away from his gun and he cursed Bert Little with bloodcurdling thoroughness.

The Mexican disarmed him and broke into the tirade, "We're ready to start for the *hacienda* of a dear friend where we will be very happy for the next fortnight," he said mockingly. "Come, it is time to start."

ILA'S FEET were numb and useless for the minute, but she could use her hands and arms a little. She reached down and grabbed the pinchbar Jeff had dropped by her cot. Desperately she stretched out and caught the hooked end around Bert's ankle. She almost yanked his foot from under him.

Jeff was hurtling toward Bert in an effort to reach him before he fired. Only for the unbalancing of the lawyer, Jeff could not have escaped.

There was a report as the gun went off. The bullet sang past Jeff's ear and cut into the wall. Bert went to the floor as Jeff barged into him. The two flailed in a rolling tangle.

Bert still clung to his sixgun, while Jeff's lay beyond his reach on the stand where Bert had placed it. Ila, her feet still numb, rolled off the cot and crept toward the fighting pair with the pinchbar in her hand.

With increasing fury and hatred, Jeff and Bert fought a grim battle. The gun crashed again. This time the bullet barely missed Ila.

"Slim!" gargled Bert. "Give me a hand!"

Steps pounded in the hall. Slim Vergie ran in the door. As though it were a signal, a blast of gunfire broke out below and on the stairs. The roar of forty-fives mingled with yells of surprise, fear and rage.

Slim whirled and fired at someone pursuing him. Jeff thought he must be knocked out and dreaming. The man coming in with smoking guns was Little Joe, the swamper. He didn't look down and out now, but was as terrifying as death's own grim reaper. His guns flamed and Slim pitched to the floor.

Jeff was so surprised, he loosened his grip. Bert gave a mighty heave and broke away from him. Bert's gun hammer clicked on a defective cartridge, saving Jeff from death.

Bert bounded past Little Joe as the swamper's guns swung around. Their flame was a fraction too late as Bert dodged through the door and plunged down the stairs.

Little Joe started after him, then staggered back and dropped as lead clipped him.

Jeff grabbed his own gun from the stand.

"Help me up, Jeff!" called Ila.

Jeff lifted her to her feet. She managed to stand. Jeff started out the door but a hail of lead drove him back.

Jeff sprayed the door with bullets, keeping the attackers from barging in. Ila staggered over and got one of Slim's guns and a belt.

"Come on! We've got to get him!" urged a voice outside the door. There came a fresh rush. Splinters flew as Jeff emptied his gun.

ILA THRUST Slim's sixgun into Jeff's hand and swiftly reloaded the empty weapon. When she had finished, she began firing through the door, the big gun bucking in her hand.

A yell drifted up from below. It was an insistant cry for help, and it came from Bert Little. The men trying to get at Jeff gave up and broke for the stairs, rushing to join their chief in the battle going on down in the main room.

"You stay here!" Jeff commanded Ila and tore after the men charging down the stairs.

Ila refused to stay in the safety of the room where she had been imprisoned. Surprisingly, Little Joe reeled to his feet, having been only knocked out by the lead. He got his bearings and ran after Jeff with Ila at his heels.

The three of them hit the big room below together. The first thing Jeff saw was Tim Quillen, heading a bunch of Pitchfork boys and a few Diamond hands, lacing lead into men making a desperate stand behind the bar.

"Give it to 'em!" yelled Quillen, acting not at all like the man Jeff had been avoiding. His eyes were the color of blue ice and the guns he held were belching deadly lead. Furthermore, the men he was leading were obeying his every word and gesture.

The reinforcements Bert had called from above were caught between two fires. Only one man made it to cover behind the bar. And right on his heels, using him for cover, was Little Joe.

"You take that end of the bar, Fess, and I'll take this end!" roared Little Joe. "Men! You clean up as they come over the top!"

"On my way, Sawyer!" yelled Quillen, sprinting for the other end of the bar.

The first man to get boiled out by the devastating fire was Bert Little. His fury at Quillen made him reckless. He popped up like a jack-in-the-box. "You damned masquerader!! This is the last time you'll pull your fancy tricks!" he snarled and swung his gun.

Fast as the move was, Quillen was faster. Twin streams of flame came from the muzzles of his guns.

Bert Little straightened up. A look of surprise spread over his face and he pitched across the bar, his account closed.

With Little finished, the others lost heart and gave up the fight. There were yells of "I quit!" and guns clattered on the counter.

Quillen and Little Joe moved expertly through the outfit making sure all were disarmed and herded into a corner where they could be easily watched.

While Little Joe kept them under his guns, Quillen reloaded and holstered his weapons. Then he reached his fingers in his mouth and pulled out two wads of something that had puffed his cheeks to apple roundness. The man was hatchet-faced. Next, he took padding from around his waist. He turned out to be lean and hawky. He grinned at the amazed Jeff.

"Who in the blue blazes are you?" Jeff demanded.

"Me and my partner are known as Fess and Sawyer," he said, naming a pair of Association detectives with the greatest reputation in the West. "And I claim I'd have gone nuts if I'd had to wear that stuff in my face another minute."

LITTLE JOE SAWYER grinned at Jeff. "This was a tough nut to crack," he said. "We was sure Bert Little was at the bottom of the hull business, but we couldn't pin a thing on him without your help. We was afraid to go directly to you for fear you'd think we was crazy and give the whole show away.. We ain't found out yet where the stock went."

"I can tell you that," Jeff said, and gave a brief account of his late experiences.

"So that was where you vanished," commented Fess in disgust. "I was so sure you'd hit back for town when you got out of the trap at the Diamond, I waited at the bridge for you."

"You knew what was going on at the Diamond?" asked Jeff.

"Hell, I was there," said Fess. "I was right on your heels. But Little had worked faster than I expected and I was late."

"For one thing," put in Little Joe, "we expected you would follow Bert and Sheila after the hint I gave you. After that we figured you'd be ripe to take into our confidence."

"It took too long for me to realize that Bert could be anything other than the older brother he had always been," said Jeff slowly. "What I don't understand is where Sheila and Dude fit into this?"

"That's what I was going to ask," said Ila. "It was Dude who took me away from the Diamond, you know." Ila related the details of her capture.

"That was the easiest thing of all to solve, once we were sure Bert Little was the brains," said Fess. "Little got Dude's help by promising you to him along with the Diamond. But Little had no intention of dividing with Dude. He cultivated Sheila Carson with promises of marriage. Then, when Dude had you packaged ready to ship across the border to marry him, Bert merely stole the package and substituted Sheila. I'll bet right this minute Dude and Sheila are there, tearing their hair. Neither of them will ever dare come back to the valley."

"Poor Sheila," said Ila. "And the worst of it is, she'll never understand and simply think she had bad luck."

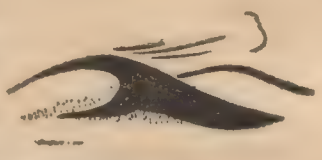
"Come with me," said Jeff, taking Ila by the arm and marching her back into the hall where they could be alone for a minute. "This is a funny place to ask a girl to marry him," he said. "But I love you and I can't put off telling you any longer. Can you forgive me for being so slow in waking up?"

Ila's arms went around his neck. "Just so you have finally awakened," she said. "I don't care where the place is. It looks just like heaven to me."

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Six-shooter holts, grips or handles may be made of various materials. Name two.

2. The Great Sand Dunes National Monument is located in what Rocky Mountain state?



3. In times of drouth ranchmen sometimes burn the thorns off prickly pear cactus. Why?

4. What was another name in common use by frontiersman for the Plains Indian's teepee or tipi?

5. What is an albino horse?

6. In the slang of the old-time cowboy, "air-tights" referred to what class of foods?

7. When a cowboy is caught "squeezin' Lizzie," what is he doing?

8. Give at least two hyphenated cowboy nicknames for the cook, each beginning with the word "dough."

9. Ft. Worth, Texas, is only about 30 miles from a newer, larger city. The rivalry between these two cities is famous throughout the West. Can you name the other?

10. Can you guess the owner's name from each of these brands?

1. 4D 2. +B 3. SX

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 108. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Martha Nossaman (left) and Sara Ann (right) rest horses and cattle as they push the herd to higher summer range

COLORADO COWGIRLS TODAY

By Clee Woods

SARA ANN NOSSAMAN took her dallies, wrapped her rope around her saddlehorn a few times. She and her sister Martha were helping their dad take out an old fence on some new range he'd just acquired. At the touch of Sara Ann's spurs, her horse Silver threw himself against the rope. Out came the post.

Sara Ann jerked her right hand away from the horn and slapped fingers into mouth. She was lucky that she had any fingers left, that they'd only been stung to a painful throb. Many an old-timer today has one or more fingers missing, from having caught them between the rope and the saddlehorn while dallying.

Seeing his daughter's distress, Tommy Nossaman ran over to her. When he was sure she wasn't seriously hurt, Tommy proceeded to show Sara Ann how to hold her rope and her reins while taking a dally. Martha rode over to get in on the lesson.

The Nossaman girls on roundup. Pictures taken by author Clee Woods

Sara Ann Masco (née Nossaman) bucks hay into the teeth of the stacker on her dad's ranch in the Colorado Rockies

THE NOSSAMAN GIRLS, young and pretty, work cattle and get in hay on the mountain ranch their granddaddy homesteaded

Tommy said, "Let your rope pass in front of your saddlehorn, so the stress will fall against the horn. Now with your right hand wrap your rope around your horn two or three times. Learn to do it fast, too. That's the way it'll be when you tie into a critter—fast and sure."

Sara Ann followed his directions up to this point. Martha asked a question, then tried it on her own saddlehorn.

Tommy went on, "Now hold your rope out in front of the horn as your horse tightens it. You can't fool around your saddlehorn with your fingers when you're takin' your dallies."

Both girls did their dallies again, under Tommy's direction.

He said, "Keep the unused part of the rope, when you have any, in your left hand. Same with your reins, in your left hand."

That's the way the two Nossaman girls have learned to be cowgirls—from the

on the Nossaman spread, the Crescent O, during the summer of 1946

Tom Nossaman shows Martha how to take her dallies. The horse is named Kid

cradle up. No dude stuff with them. They and their father before them were born on the San Juan River in the Rockies in southern Colorado, in the third house Tommy's father had built on his homestead. The first and second homes were burned by the Ute Indians. They let grandfather stay after he built the third home, mainly because the U. S. Army moved into old Fort Lewis at what is now Pagosa Springs, Colorado.

All through the war Tommy Nossaman had only what help he'd raised and trained himself—Martha and Sara Ann, two pretty cowgals as trim and saddlewise as you'll find in a hundred-mile ride. Martha is only 17, Sara Ann 19, but for several years now they've been making full hands on the Crescent O ranch.

One day I'd see both of them in the branding pen. Another day I'd see Sara Ann bucking hay up to the big ricks that were to feed the Nossaman herd through the coming winter. The bucker is a heavy rig with long wooden teeth that slither through the stubble close to the ground and pick up about every blade of the cured hay. It's pushed by an old Auburn car cut down short and geared for this heavy work. Sara Ann swings it around, in and out, up and down, as skilfully as the most accomplished "cat" driver.

While Sara Ann bucks the hay in to the stacker which Tommy runs, Martha is off driving a team hitched to a hayrake. She is throwing the hay into long windrows, where the bucker will pick it up.

After the haying season is over, you're liable to see Martha riding fence and Sara Ann casually pushing a bunch of cattle along. At the same time, each of these girls has led her class at the high school in town. Martha won a scholarship and this fall she left the ranch for the first time, going to college.

Sara Ann? Well, when I was making a picture of her pulling out a fence post with Silver and lasso, there was a cowboy watching with great interest. He was John Masco, colted on the adjoining ranch.

Not long after the picture making, I saw Sara Ann and John riding side by side down a trail. It was getting late, deep dusk, and I thought then that it wasn't any joint day's work on the two spreads that kept these ranch youngsters out so late. It was a good guess. Sara Ann and John were married recently. Now they're building their own little *casa* on the Masco ranch.

Martha expertly applies her dad's lesson while Kid hauls at fence post

Passage to Brazos

By William Freeman Hough

BETTY wanted to see the world, and Steve wanted her world to be the range country. Which of them won?

WITH an hour to kill before train time, Steve Elvidge stepped into the little shooting gallery a block from the depot, picked up a rifle from the counter and smashed eight clay pipes with eight shots.

The proprietor of the gallery, a scrawny man with faded blue eyes, stood there with jaw slack for a moment. He blinked at the tall young man who had pushed a dove-colored Stetson back from his brow.

"Professional, ain't you?" he said at last.

"Was," said Steve. "I've quit the game. Back to the old homestead for me."

"Yeah. Tough racket. Try the rabbits, mister, with no charge and no prizes. Like to see a good shooter."

This small busman's holiday was no thrill for Steve; just something to while

away the time until the train left. He picked up another rifle, hefted it, held it to the light from the doorway.

"We might make a business deal," suggested the proprietor. "I'd get some new guns and you could. . . ."

Steve didn't hear the man at all. His eyes were widening over the rifle sights; fixed on a girl who stood just outside the door of the gallery. Her hands rested on the back of a wheel chair, a chair in which sat a blanketed man with a beard. But mostly Steve's gaze was on the girl—the red hair showing under the white nurse's cap; the hazel eyes that were, for the instant, meeting his own astonished glance.

At length he turned back to the counter and blazed away at the string of dodging rabbits—and missed four out of five. Carefully he laid the rifle back on the counter and reached into his pocket for a coin.

"You don't owe me nothin'," said the scrawny man, his lips widening in a knowing grin. "Redheads will throw a man off stride more often than not. Try again."

"It isn't red," said Steve more to himself than to the proprietor. "It's auburn." His hands were trembling slightly, and he shoved them in his pockets. He hadn't seen Betty Harlan in nearly two years, not since their quarrel, and he was irritated by his emotion.

Large drops of warm rain were splattering the walk when he left the gallery. The girl and the wheel chair were almost to the depot; he could see her working through the traffic at the corner.

So this was the consummation of her nursing career—trundling some invalid about in a wheel chair! And what was she doing back here in the West? Her last words to him were burned into his memory:

"I'm sick of wind and weather, bawling beef and branding smells. I won't marry you, Steve, and settle down to a life of drudgery. I want to make something of myself. I want to become a nurse and see something of the world."

Steve strolled down the street toward the depot, his mind occupied with those memories. Behind him thunder rolled across the hills, a muffled dirge to his thoughts.

He came upon the wheel chair at the entrance to the depot lunch room. The occupant, a thin-faced man with a small pointed beard, was staring at the backs of his hairy hands and paying attention to no one. Steve passed around the chair and entered the lunch room.

The place was well filled at the moment. He toured the length of the counter and searched the booths with practiced eye. A waitress beckoned to him, led him to a booth with but one occupant. "If you don't mind, ma'am?" she said to the seated girl.

The girl remained very quiet over a bowl of vegetable soup. Only for an instant did her hazel eyes slant up to the tall man waiting there.

Steve slid into the booth and sat down on the hard board with a soft thump. Gently he laid his dove-colored Stetson beside him and said, "These cells don't have much padding." He waited; no remark from the girl. "But maybe a person is supposed to furnish their own padding." Again he waited. "If you'd rather eat alone?"

"Oh, no; it's quite all right."

HE PICKED up a greasy menu and studied her over the top of it, and felt all the old twinges about his heart. She had matured but had lost none of her rich color. The nurse's cap seemed just the right touch for her auburn hair; it perched up there like a pert butterfly. He watched her sensitive lips touch the edge of the soup spoon.

The waitress brought her a plate of roast beef, and Steve, after one glance at it, ordered pork. Then he leaned back to watch her probe the beef. Bent forks and dull knives were mute evidence to other such plates of beef.

"Look," said Steve after watching a period of hopeless struggle. "Why don't you send that hunk of bull back to where it came from?"

"I'll manage, thank you," she said coolly.

"Of course I'm objectionable, but to get service in a place like this you have to be tough—as tough as the meat."

"If I take it to court you can be my lawyer," she told him.

"Okay, okay," he said resignedly and began to fracture a hard roll with nervous

fingers. He arranged the crumbs in the shape of a clay pipe and snapped at them with his fingers.

"You'd do better with a rifle," she said, carefully removing a crumb bullet from her plate.

Steve decided to try once more.

"The man out there in the wheel chair," he said. "Sort of a rush job for the wide open spaces? I mean, maybe he's on his last legs—or rather I should say wheels—and you're taking him—but maybe that's a professional secret."

"You might call it that, Dr. Anthony."

"Bull's-eye! None of my business."

"Approximately." She softened this by looking up at him with just a faint smile about her sensitive lips. Steve swallowed again; that smile always did wreck him.

The waitress brought his plate and Steve pointed to it. "Pork, see? Almost always you can cut it."

"Experience is a great teacher," she admitted. Then she gathered up her gloves and the check. "You'll pardon my departure?"

She moved swiftly, gracefully to the cashier at the counter, paid the check and went on to the man in the wheel chair. She bent over him to say something, then pushed the chair out of Steve's vision. Steve sighed and poked aimlessly at the pork on his plate.

Well, he'd asked for it! He hadn't needed to sit in the same booth with her. But, after all, she hadn't needed to turn the old knife around in his heart by refusing even to speak his name. She'd been anything but happy to see him again; and what could he deduce from that? Was she really sorry about it all? Was she unhappy in this nurse job? Or was he just hoping?

He emerged from the depot and met a gust of rain-laden air. The train was made up and was being loaded. He marched along beside a baggage truck on which his trunk rode. That trunk contained, beside his clothing, over a thousand dollars' worth of fancy shooting equipment. He'd plunged heavily on it.

There was some delay and confusion up at the combination baggage and express car. The truck halted but Steve went on. Some men were loading one of those long, ominous-looking boxes into the car. A coffin. When it was inside the men tossed up a heavy express box.

BETTY HARLAN and her charge were waiting at one side. She stood behind the chair, trying to shield the patient from the whipping rain and wind. She bent down to say something to the blanketed man and he waved a thin hand in reply. Steve heard him say, "It doesn't bother me, Miss Harlan. I don't mind riding in the same car with it. I may be wearing one of those wooden sweaters myself soon."

"Don't talk like that," she returned crisply.

The chair and its occupant came next. Two men lifted it into the car and the express messenger rolled it from view.

"I'll come right in through the door," called the girl.

The messenger mopped his sweaty face and said, "No can do, ma'am."

The wind fluttered her little cap as she said firmly, "I must remain with my patient."

"Sorry. Can't be done this time."

"But I must be with him."

"Then take him back to the coach."

"He's unable to leave the chair, and the chair can't be taken into the coach."

A voice reached them from inside the car. "I'll be all right, Miss Harlan. I won't need you for a while. Go back to the coach and be comfortable."

She spread her hands helplessly and stepped back, into Steve who was waiting there. "Beg pardon," she murmured. Then, looking up at him, "Oh!" The wind caught her white uniform skirt, lifted it and slapped rain against her legs. She bent quickly to smooth down the skirt. "A nurse always stays with her patient," she declared. "This is silly."

"Must be some special reason for it," said Steve. He took her arm. "The rain is taking all the starch out of your dress," he suggested, and drew her along toward the coach.

He helped her up the steps and she turned back to look at him, and Steve wanted nothing half so much as to pull her

back into his arms. She changed her glance to the closed door of the express car, reached out and tried the dusty knob of it. It was locked and a baffled expression flitted across her face.

The coach was filling with passengers. Steve followed her to a seat and stood there looking down at her, and at last she met his gaze and flushed. "You may as well, I suppose," she said, and moved over to give him room.

"There'll be no quiz program," he assured her. "I've had my lesson."

She wrinkled her nose at him pleasantly, and then, seeming to remember, looked quickly out the window. Rain was splashing against the glass and running down in muddy rivulets.

"We can talk about the weather," he said. "We—well—need this rain. The range is pretty dry. Or maybe you're not interested in the range."

She turned to him again. "Look, Steve. I don't want to be stuffy, but it's better that we—"

"It's nice to hear you say my name again," softly.

The train began to move. She looked solemnly at her hands. "Go on," she murmured. "Talk about the range. I'd—I'd like to hear of it."

"You've been homesick!" he almost pleaded.

"I've had my bad moments, Steve." She stiffened slightly. "But I've made a success of my career."

"Have you? I mean—that's nice. Glad to hear it, liar that I am."

"What about the ranch? And is your mother still alive?"

"Both fine, they tell me. I've been gone all spring and summer. Joined up with a show—to show off. Got restless at home. You know."

"I've learned that you turned out to be a crack shot. Did you enjoy it, Steve?"

"At first. It was a change. I had a wild oat to sew."

"It grew?"

"Like a pansy. Oh, it was nice to hear the crowds applaud, but that wasn't the answer to my needs."

"Possibly not. . . . I saw you once."

"You did?" eagerly.

"In Omaha. I went to the show just because—well, it was a Western show and—"

"You were homesick!"

She nodded. "You did very well, Steve. I liked it. And there was a girl who shot too."

"The manager's wife," he said quickly, defensively.

"You both made a nice appearance and I thought—"

"Nope," he interrupted, "nothing like that."

THERE followed a period of silence. The train was out in the country now, beating along into the storm. Betty pressed her face against the window and gazed out across the land. Presently she sniffed.

"Sage!" she exclaimed.

"Freshened with rain, Betty. There's no smell just like it."

"Nothing," she echoed.

"Good for man or beast—and homesick girl."

She was running a finger over the soft crown of the dove-colored Stetson he held on his lap, and he sensed that the strings of her professional package had almost slipped from grasp.

"That is the reason I took this Purvis case," she said presently.

"You mean the guy in the chair?"

"Arthritis. I'm taking him to Hot Springs. I thought that a sight of the West would take some of the bite out of my—well, longing."

"A sight of it will just aggravate the situation."

She smiled faintly. "You forget, Steve, that I've had a period of intense training. Nurses are taught to subdue our own emotions and feelings."

"Just a glass front you can polish up once in a while. Underneath you're still human, and a human has emotions and longings no training can erase."

"My, you talk just like a professor! On the opposite side of the subject, of course."

Steve reached over and took her hand. "I can prove it!" he said seriously. "Look, Betty. Tonight I'll be back at the old ranch.

I'll crawl into bed and sleep well. In the morning I'll see a fresh range, and ride a fresh horse after a good breakfast. I'll be home."

"Granted," she said, but made no effort to remove her hand.

"And where will you be? Fussing around a guy with arthritis, begging him to eat, feeding him medicine, seeing that he gets a hot mud bath or something. Oh, there'll be other nurses to talk to, probably, but the conversation will be about your patients or medicine or vitamins."

"You don't know the least thing about what nurses think or do, Steve. You'd be surprised how they discuss the shallowness and weakness of the males they meet."

"Cripples!" with a snort.

"Not always."

"Then your training to subdue emotions and such are the bunk, eh?"

SHE FLUSHED. "We keep our conversation under control, just as I've kept my homesickness under control. You see, I can see the sage again, smell it, and go on refreshed. I don't have to stop and bury my nose in it for—for years."

This was dangerous ground, thought Steve. They were working right back to the subject that had been the basis of their quarrel almost two years ago.

The train conductor stopped beside them and asked for tickets. He was an old man, soiled by years of smoke and cinders. He fumbled with his watch chain and peered at them over steel-rimmed spectacles. He punched the tickets and grinned.

"Hello, Stevie. Howdy, Miss Betty? Goin' home, you two? 'Bout time, if you are, which I guess is correct, huh?"

"Howdy, Jim," said Steve. He turned to Betty, "Remember Jim Shannon? Used to run the local freight through Brazos and set fire to our range."

"Why, of course!" She smiled up at the old man. "How are you, Mr. Shannon?"

"Tolerable, tolerable. Gettin' old, a mite. Nice to see you youngsters again. Seems as though you two should of been hitched long ago."

"We—we're not hitched, as you call it," said Betty, moving away from Steve. "This is just a chance meeting."

"Aw now!" in protest. "Why, that little white hat you got on—"

"It is a nurse's cap, Mr. Shannon. Not a wedding hat."

Steve waved a hand. "She knows all about pills and purgatives, Jim. Trained to the minute. Getting acquainted with arthritis too."

"Sure enough? Well, excuse me for callin' the wrong turn. Sort of dependin' on memory, I reckon."

Betty leaned across Steve and said, "Mr.

Shannon, I have a patient up in the express car."

"Oh, the party in the wheel chair!"

"That's right. And I ought to be with him, since he's almost helpless. Can't you arrange it for me?"

The conductor shook his head. "Can't be done, Miss Betty. No one allowed in that car on this trip except the messenger. The doors of the car are kept locked."

"But surely you have a key."

"Yep, I've got a key, but I can't let you in." He leaned down over them and lowered his voice. "Got a heavy shipment of currency in the express car this trip. Fifty odd thousand dollars. Got to be awful careful, see?"

"Oh," she said, and leaned back against the seat.

Steve whistled softly. "That's a lot of money for this train, Jim."

"You tellin' me! Sorry I can't help you out, Betty. Your sick man will be all right until you can see him again."

"I hope so," she sighed.

The conductor passed on down the aisle, and a period of silence followed. The rain still beat against the window, and light was fading from the flat land that wheeled past. Soon there would be nothing to see from that window except the occasional glimmer of some rancher's lantern.

"So old Jim Shannon took you to be a bride."

"I think he knew better," she retorted. "You can't tell me that a man of his age doesn't know the difference between a nurse's cap and a wedding outfit."

Steve sighed. "He may have had the right idea at that. Look, I'm putting my hand down on the seat, palm up. What are you going to do about it?"

BETTY HARLAN laughed softly and let her hand fall into his palm. "Since you'll be getting off at Brazos, you might as well have this moment."

Steve closed his eyes and grinned. "Just for that I'll let you tell me all about your patient. I know it's close to your heart."

"Professional secrecy," she reminded him.

"I suppose he's rich," Steve went on.

"Well, wealthy, apparently. I really don't know much about him. I just took the case yesterday. I'm worried about him."

"Why?"

"He's been ill so long that he's reached the brooding stage; talks about dying or—or getting rid of himself."

"Humph! Fat chance he's got to commit suicide."

"You'd be surprised how shrewd some of these invalids get; they have lots of time to think and plan."

"Well, I'm all for it, so far as Invalid Purvis is concerned."

"Steve! That's positively morbid and indecent." She tried to remove her hand but he gripped it firmly.

"Betty would be out of a job then," he went on. "Nursing job, I mean; for I'm very healthy. So here's to Mr. Purvis and his vial of deadly poison." Steve grinned at her.

"You're not the least bit amusing, Steve. It so happens he's got a gun."

"What's that?"

"He's got a gun in his pocket," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Are you sure, Betty?"

"I felt it when I tucked the blanket around him. It was in his side coat pocket."

"It might have been a can opener or something."

"Don't be silly! I know a gun when I touch it."

"Hm—," Steve mused. "But it's not your fault if he uses it on himself."

"Perhaps not, but it won't look so well on my nurse's record. A thing like that has a way of following you around. Like—like almost you're a murderer."

"Nonsense!"

"But it's true, Steve! If only this railroad would let me see him for a minute, I'd try to get the gun from Mr. Purvis."

"Why didn't you take it when you felt it?"

"There wasn't time," she cried. "It was there on the platform, just before they loaded him into the car."

He patted her hand. "Remember the controlled emotions, Betty. Maybe Purvis is carrying the gun for protection; he may have a lot of money with him."

A TRAINMAN came through the car lighting the ceiling lamps. Steve leaned back and stared thoughtfully down the aisle. A fat baby with banana smeared over its face peered at them across the back of the seat ahead. Betty sat tensely, her hand a tight ball in his palm.

"Well?" she said after a period of silence.

"I'll hunt up Jim Shannon," said Steve, getting up.

He backed the conductor into a corner of the next coach to the rear and talked earnestly to him for several minutes. Shannon scratched his thin thatch and looked distressed.

"It's against special orders, Steve," he muttered. "That car is supposed to stay locked between stations."

"But this is an emergency, Jim. Betty expected to stay with her patient, watch over him. Now he's up there with a gun in his pocket."

"Well, all right; we'll have a look at him. You can take the gun off the fella, then she'll feel better. But you folks can't stay in the car."

"Fair enough. Let's go."

They picked up Betty, and the three of them went out the door and stood on the swaying, rain-drenched platform. Shannon found the right key and put it in the express door lock. He pushed with his knee and lurched into the car, closely followed by Steve and Betty.

Steve knew there was something wrong the instant he bumped into the old conductor who had stopped abruptly. Jim Shannon was pointing to the wheel chair which stood beside a pile of trunks. It was empty. Betty squeezed past them and ran to it, putting her hand into the blanket nest and staring wildly about the car.

"I thought you said he couldn't move." Steve had joined her.

"He—he can't! Only—we're too late, Steve; Look over there!"

In the dim shadows at the far end of the car a figure lay sprawled on the floor. There was something ominous in its position as faint light from the swinging lamp overhead cast a glimmer over a pool of blood by the man's head.

"That's Jake, the express messenger!" cried Shannon, and wabbled forward.

They bent over the man. He wasn't dead but he had received a hard and sharp blow on the back of the head. Gently they turned the unconscious messenger over, stared into his white face.

"But where is Mr. Purvis?" cried Betty.

"Yeh, where is he?" echoed Steve crisply. "He could tell us something about this."

Jim Shannon was pointing again, this time at the old-fashioned express box resting against the side of the car. The iron lid was up. The box was empty.

"A cripple, eh?" said Steve.

Shannon reached for the emergency cord over his head, but Steve stopped him. "Want to give him a chance to jump the train?" he cried.

Shannon mopped his mouth and stared about. Betty, white of face, cried out, "But he couldn't have done this! His arthritis!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Steve broke in. "Can't you get it yet? Arthritis and the wheel chair are just a blind, something to make it look good, give him a chance. Your alleged invalid is plenty shrewd, all right. No wonder he had a gun in his pocket!"

The man on the floor groaned, and Betty kneeled down to move his head so that the weight of it would not rest on the wound. She looked up then, wetting her lips, and Steve felt very sorry for her.

"Well," he said, "we've got to find Mr. Purvis."

"Fifty thousand dollars," muttered Shannon. "He's jumped the train with it, risked his neck, 'cause we've been moving right along ever since we left town."

"A guy with his nerve wouldn't mind jumping with all that moolah."

STEVE went to the door at the forward end of the car. The door was locked and chained. Purvis couldn't possibly have gone that way. The man must have used the messenger's key to the rear door. When he spoke of this Shannon shook his head. "Here's all the car keys on Jake's belt ring," he said. "We had to unlock that door when we came in, remember? A man couldn't let himself out, lock the

door and then get the key back to Jake's ring. But that wide side door there is open a few inches."

Steve stared at the side door where the rain was beating in through the slight opening and forming a pool on the scarred floor. "The same thing is true there," he said. "A man couldn't go out that door and then draw it shut behind him, not unless he had wings; and Purvis, it seems, is no angel."

"Then," said Betty with widening eyes, "he must still be in this car!"

Steve eyed the closely racked trunks and express boxes. "Not within range of the human eye, he isn't. If he's smart enough to have a key that'll open the money box, he's smart enough to have other keys."

"Well," said Shannon hopelessly, "I'm going to throw a wire off at the next station, warn the sheriff at Brazos."

Betty ran fingers along the man's head. "Get me some water, will you, Steve?"

There was a water cooler midway down the length of the car. Steve went to it and drew a cup. On the way back to her he glanced down at the long box that had been loaded just ahead of the alleged invalid. A yellow express sticker caught his eye, and he was thinking of this as he handed Betty the cup.

That sticker continued to interest him as he knelt beside Betty. It meant that the casket was being sent by express to some undertaker down the line. That also meant that it was empty, for if it contained a body there would be a copy of the death certificate on the lid of the box.

Shannon was scrawling his signature to the telegram when Steve came to him. Steve drew the old conductor along to the box and pointed down.

"Well?" said Shannon.

"Empty, eh?"

Shannon nodded.

"Sent by express."

"Exactly. And I seem to recall that when the men loaded it this afternoon they didn't have to strain much."

"Not when it's got just a coffin in it, no. What you drivin' at, Steve?"

Steve drew the old man back a step. "Does that lid seem to fit down very well? Don't it look to you like it was off bevel?"

"Nothin' too unusual in that," said Shannon. He stared at Steve. "I thought it was Jake who got hit on the head."

Steve went back to the prone messenger and began groping about. "See his gun anywhere?" he asked Betty.

"No, I haven't seen a gun."

Steve nodded and passed down the car. He found his own trunk in a pile and opened it up. Selecting a revolver, he loaded it carefully and then went back to where Betty and Shannon stood watching.

"Keep down, you two," he warned.

"Why—what?" Betty was staring at the gun in his hand.

"You're loco!" spluttered Jim Shannon.

Steve went to the long box and took a position at the end of it. Bracing himself, he put the toe of his boot against the narrow edge of the lid. The train swung around a curve and his boot slid off. He waited, then tried again. With a quick breath he gave the lid a sharp shove.

THERE was a rasping sound as board scraped against board and loose screws bit into the soft wood. The lid slid back a foot or so, and almost instantly a hand holding a gun appeared. The hand was followed by the point of a short beard; sharp eyes lifted over the edge of the box.

Steve shot twice, just to be sure, and a bloody hand fell back into the box. He took two long strides along the box, leaned back and reached down to fasten his free hand in a loosened collar. He yanked.

"Mr. Purvis, I believe," he said, standing the patient on his feet. "Your arthritis is improving rapidly since you arrived here in the West."

"Wise guy, huh?" snarled Purvis.

"Just a country bumpkin," said Steve, grinning. "You're the wise guy." Over his shoulder he said, "Jim, take a look in the coffin to see if the money is there, which I have no doubt it is."

It was, bundles of banded currency the sight of which brought joy to the old man's eyes. He cuddled it to his breast for a moment and then dumped it back in the express box and closed the lid.

"You can drop off that wire now," Steve went on, "only change it to have the sheriff meet us at the depot in Brazos."

"Right, Steve."

Steve beckoned to Betty and said, "Is there something you'd like to do about your patient's hand? Seems to have two holes in it."

"No—no! But I'll do what I can."

Steve shrugged. "Then I'll just tie him up so he won't spring any more wise stunts on us. I wouldn't want him reaching for that deadly vial of poison which he's probably hidden from his nurse."

"That doesn't sound the least bit funny to me," she informed him. "And I'm not his nurse!"

He sat the prisoner down on the coffin box and surveyed him casually. "Rather an elaborate setup you arranged," he said to the man. "Shipped a coffin, had arthritis and a nurse—everything perfect. And it dang near worked out for you."

"Nuts!" said Purvis with a grimace of pain.

"How did you ever guess it?" asked Betty.

"Oh, just a lucky diagnosis, Betty. I might just as well have missed it, and then Mr. Purvis would have had ample chance to slide out of his comfy bed and make off with the money. At some stop, likely. That wouldn't be too difficult, what with the robbery excitement and all. Or he may have arrangements with the undertaker to whom this box is being shipped."

WHEN the train arrived at Brazos the sheriff was waiting. He listened to explanations, nodded approval at Steve and then led the prisoner off to jail. Steve and Betty stood on the depot platform and watched the lights of the train fade into the night. The rain had stopped and the stars were out. The air was soft and balmy, laden with the odor of rain-freshened sage.

"Steve," she said when all was still, "do you know when the next train leaves for the East?"

"I haven't the faintest notion," he replied. "What's more, I'm not the least bit interested."

"But I've got to go."

"The only transportation I know about or care about is yonder at the livery barn. It's a buggy, headed West." He took her arm and drew her along the cinder platform.

"Steve!" she cried, drawing back.

"Well?"

"I can't—you see, well, I've left my suitcase on the train."

"A small matter in the light of greater events. Mother will lend you a nightgown."

"But I wear pajamas!"

"Still a trifling considerations. You can use some of mine. And don't try to think of any more excuses."

She sighed gently and went along with him.

A little later they were in the buggy, jogging along the damp road and hearing the sound of crickets from the rimming brush. There were other small sounds and odors, things she now realized she had missed much these past months.

"Steve," she said, breaking a silence, "your mother will be surprised at this, won't she?"

"Oh, Mother is never surprised at anything. She'll be happy to see you, Betty."

She relaxed against the back cushion.

Steve lifted a hand and pinched the inside of his nose. He waited hopefully, and at last the sneeze came, a wholly convincing explosion.

"Steve, are you catching cold?"

"Seems like it." He grinned in the darkness.

"But you mustn't!"

"Well, I can't seem to get any attention from you short of a cold. If I must resort to your nurse's instinct. . . ."

"Oh," she said softly, and snuggled closer to his warm and extremely healthy body. "It isn't really necessary—the cold I mean."

"That's better!" He slid his arm about her waist. "Cold is all gone now, honey. You're a marvel."

"And you're a fraud," she whispered, pushing her lips against his cheek.

FOOL'S GOLD

By James W. Routh

A WOMAN with a pail in her hand stepped out of the adobe house as he rode his leg weary horse past the series of empty corrals. She stopped near the well, staring at him, the hot wind whipping her gingham skirts, the red glow of the setting sun smoldering in her heavy dark hair.

"Who—who are you?" she called, while he was still at some distance. "What do you want here?"

Something in the way she stood reminded him of a bird poised for flight. But she stood fast, clutching the handle of the pail as if it were a weapon, until his horse limped to a stop and he looked down at her at close range. He saw then that she was quite young. Her eyes were dark grey and large. If she hadn't looked so scared, she would have been pretty. He pulled off his lop brimmed hat.

"Name of Fortune, ma'am. Don Fortune —of nowhere in particular. I was hoping for a meal and a chance to rest up. I've come a long way."

His drawl was slow and easy. Slow and easy, too, was the way he lifted a long leg over the horn of his saddle and slid down, facing her. He was a lean six footer, with rust red hair and a lantern-jawed face, sun-blackened and beard stubbled. His hazy blue eyes were those of a man who peered always toward some distant horizon or some far off mountain. The girl looked him over briefly, her lips drawn tight.

"We can feed you and your horse, of course," she said in her clear voice. "But if you're wise, you won't—"

"What's this? Company for supper? How nice! You weren't scaring him off, were you, Faith honey?"

The interrupting voice was a woman's

voice, too, but a deep contralto with a kind of vibrant warmth about it. The girl jumped around at the sound of it, but Don Fortune did not notice. The woman who was coming toward them across the yard filled his vision. She was a tall woman, long limbed and full breasted, with a way of moving that caught a man's eye. Hair the color of raw gold flamed about her head. Her skin seemed to have a golden sheen, too, and the glance of her great dark eyes and the friendly smile she gave him made him forget that he had not eaten in two days. It made him forget the other girl, and time and place and circumstance. It sent a fierce eagerness surging through him. And then, strangely, something chilled that eagerness and moved him almost irresistibly to mount his worn out horse and ride on.

Confused and speechless, he stood grip-

A FASCINATING woman had woven an evil spell about the ranch that Don Fortune rode into unsuspectingly — and almost fatally

ping his hat while Faith glanced at the other woman in a strange way and spoke in a strange way.

"If I've scared him, I'm sure you can reassure him. I've told him we can feed him and his horse. He says he is Don Fortune and that he's from nowhere in particular. And this," she went on, her grey eyes turning upon Don, "is Rena Barnett, my—my step-mother."

Don continued to stand speechless, as unsure of himself as he had ever been. There could not be, he supposed, more than three or four years difference in the ages of the two girls, but the one was a full matured woman with a heady lure about her that made the other seem colorless and uninteresting and childish.

"Cat got your tongue?" Rena Barnett smiled teasingly. "Or are you girl shy, Don Fortune? We're harmless, aren't we, Faith honey?"

Don's cheeks burned, but he had never been easily stampeded. An answering smile worked across his wide lips.

"I was just sayin' to Miss Faith that I'd hoped to get a meal here and a chance to rest up. I've come a long way."

SOMETHING flickered in her dark eyes, but Faith spoke quickly. "And I was just telling him that we could feed him and his horse, but that if were wise he wouldn't stay—not even long enough to eat!"

Thereupon she turned her slim, straight back and marched, pail in hand, to the well. Puzzled by the sharpness in her clear, high voice as much as by her words, he found some measure of understanding in Rena's quiet murmur.

"Faith's a darling, Don. Don't mind her. She doesn't mean to be inhospitable." She laid her hand on his arm, smiled up at him and said lightly: "You look as if you were starved, cowboy. Supper is almost ready, so take care of your horse and wash up."

The warmth of her seemed to flow about him. She was a friendly woman, he told himself, trying to put him at ease, trying to smooth over the younger girl's queerness. Looking down at her, he saw the flecks of gold in her dark brown eyes, the long line of her throat and the rise of her firm breasts. She was a woman who must unfailingly appeal to any man, but she was a married woman and mistress of this ranch. He moved back a little and looked beyond her to where Faith stood, staring down into the well. Something in that sight steadied him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Barnett."

Then he stepped around her and took the pail from the girl's hand. "Let me do this," he said gently.

Her glance flashed up at him. A tinge of color loomed beneath the smooth tan of her cheeks, lending her a sudden mild radiance. Behind them, Rena laughed softly.

"Isn't it nice to have a young and husky man around. Faith honey? We aren't used to it, are we?"

Faith wheeled like a startled kitten, and like a kitten she seemed fairly to spit: "What a thing to say! You—you— Oh, what kind of a woman are you?"

And without another glance at Don, she ran across the yard into the house. Completely astounded, aware of some ugly thing glimpsed but not clearly seen, he looked with a kind of reluctance at the other woman. Rena shook her golden head and sighed.

"Poor child! I'm afraid she resents me too much."

Then, with a sad smile, she also turned and walked away from him across the yard. His eyes followed her against his will. She was a woman who would always draw men's eyes. He knew little about women, and he'd never seen one like her, but it was easy for him to understand how other women might resent her and be jealous of her. It was not difficult for him to perceive, either, how Faith must feel towards the woman who had taken her mother's place. He filled the pail and carried it to the back door of the house and set it on the step.

THE SUN dropped below the western mountains as he unsaddled his horse, watered it, found a feed of grain and a bundle of hay for it, and rubbed it down while it munched. He was still occupied with this when Faith called him in to supper.

When he entered the kitchen the two women and a man were seated at a table set beneath an east fronting window. It was a pleasant room that gave evidence of having been fitted out and lived and worked in by a woman who loved it. This impression caused him to glance about curiously as Faith left her chair to go to the stove, and Rena spoke quietly.

"Come right in, Don Fortune. I've told my husband about you."

Cass Barnett greeted him with a slight smile and a firm handshake but did not rise.

"You'll pardon me, young man," he said in a voice as deep and slow as Don's. "Since my horse piled me, I don't move easy."

He was a squarely built man with a square, blunt-featured face that looked fleshless and was deeply lined. His hair and mustaches were snow white and his eyes, like Faith's, were grey. The warmth and vigor of Rena formed an even stronger contrast with him than with Faith.

Don's hunger did full justice to an excellent meal. But concentrate as he might upon his eating, he could not shut out of his consciousness an awareness of Rena and an awareness of tension in the air. The woman devoted herself to her husband in a way that should have been convincing. She anticipated his wants, waited on him, smiled at him. She touched his hand and leaned close to him. She permitted Faith to do nothing for him. She ignored Don. And yet, everything she did and every word she spoke seemed to be directed at him. And once, when he glanced up he caught Faith looking at her step-mother, and was startled by the loathing and the fear in the girl's grey eyes.

If Cass Barnett was aware of any of this, he gave no sign of it. He seemed as unconscious of the feeling that ran so strongly between his daughter and his wife as he was of anything unusual in the devotion of a woman like Rena to a broken old man. He ate little and slowly. He stoked his pipe while Don accepted second helpings, watching him with a faint smile.

"I like to see a man eat as if he enjoyed it," he said. "Used to do right well myself before I got smashed up."

"You will again, darling," Rena assured him. "When the doctors get through with you, you'll be your old self again."

"If you really expect that," Faith said sharply, "why do you insist on selling the ranch?"

It was Barnett who replied. "You know why, child. I wish you'd stop fighting it. You're going to college and Rena and me are takin' a trip around the world. When we get back, maybe we'll find us another spread that ain't as far from ary town as this. By that time, though, you'll more'n likely be married, so it won't matter."

"It will always matter!" Faith declared. "This is home—this is where—"

"Stop arguing, you two," Rena interposed. "You know it upsets your father,

Faith. Why can't you be more considerate?"

She spoke gently, but the look she gave the girl was not gentle. And Faith's face was stark white now and her grey eyes blazed with a kind of fury, and suddenly the ugly thing Don had glimpsed out in the yard seemed to be there in that room. He moved uneasily, telling himself that this was the only meal he would eat at the CXB.

"Rena's right, Faith," Barnett said tiredly. "There's nothing to be gained by arguin'. What's done is done. What's past is past."

The girl's eyes turned to him then and the blaze died out of them and suddenly they were soft and glistening with tears. She wheeled and went across the room. And at that moment Don heard horses coming up to the ranch from the south.

"They're coming!" Faith said in a choked voice.

SOMETHING caused Don to glance at Rena then, and he was startled at the gloating expression that he caught on her beautiful face. It was gone instantly, however, and he did not know if either of the others saw it.

"We'd better do our talkin' in the parlor," Barnett said. "Will you help me, my dear?"

Rena was on her feet before he finished, looking like a lovely pagan goddess. Don also rose to offer his help, but she gave him no chance. She lifted the old man to his feet with surprising ease, handed him his two canes and supported him with her arm around his bent shoulders. Even with this assistance he walked with difficulty and evident pain. Don watched them disappear throught a door into the front of the house. Behind him Faith spoke huskily.

"He could have a wheel chair, but she makes him walk!"

Turning slowly, he looked at her. Her eyes were wide and blank. She did not seem to be aware of him or of the two riders who were trotting their horses around the house to the yard at the rear. He stared at her, pulled this way and that by his uncertainty, moved less by pity than by something he dared not then attempt to define. The meal he'd eaten lay like a lead weight on his stomach, and a chill spread through the whole of him.

"Reckon I'll get out, ma'am," he managed to say. "Before your visitors come in."

A shudder seemed to pass over her, and awareness returned, driving the blankness from her eyes, brushing a faint color into her cheeks. She spoke swiftly in a low pitched, breathless voice.

"Don't go! Not yet—not until—"

"Evenin', Faith. Where's your pa and Rena?"

The man who spoke was a big man with bold black eyes, a cleft chin and a hawk nose. The one who followed him into the room was about Don's size and weight, a leanly muscular chap with a hatchet face, shrewd yellowish-green eyes and long thin lips. Faith whipped about as if stabbed, yet in that instant she seemed to regain her composure.

"Good evening," she said evenly. "My father is in the parlor. You're to go right on in, Blake."

They did not go right on in. They stood where they were, staring hard at Don, who stared right back at them, wondering what it was all about. He knew men, even if he didn't know women, and he was in no doubt about this pair.

"Had company for supper, did you?" the black-haired man said. "Or are you hirin' hands again?"

"Of course not," Faith said quickly. "Mr. Safford is buying the ranch, isn't he?"

"You bet," nodded the hatchet-faced man. Come to close the deal."

"Well, go on in, then," Faith said. "You know the way."

"Sure," the black-haired Blake murmured. But instead of leading the way, he looked again at Don, saying: "Ridin' the grub line, huh?"

He made it an insult. Don's first impression became a solid conviction.

"Mindin' my own business," he drawled quietly.

Blake's black eyes narrowed and his thick lips hardened, but just then Rena came in behind Don.

"Hello, Kemp! Good evening, Safford. Didn't Faith tell you that Cass is waiting

in the parlor? Come along! Don, you help yourself to any bed that suits you in the bunkhouse."

THE SIGHT of her wiped the hardness from Kemp Blake's face as a sponge wipes pencil marks from a slate. Don glanced sharply at the woman. Rena was smiling, not at Blake or Safford, but at him and something within him surged powerfully at the promise in her dark eyes. Then she turned and followed the two men out of the room, swaying her hips, turning her shoulders, lifting her head in that way she had.

"So she's got you fooled, too!"

Faith's voice, low pitched but bitter with contempt, brought him around. She was staring at him in a way that made him cringe inwardly, and in instantaneous reaction he yearned to lay violent hands on her. Before he realized it, he had hold of her slim shoulders. But then, instead of shaking her, he stared down into her grey eyes that looked back at him steadily.

"Makes you sore to be called a fool, does it?" she asked. "Well, what are you?"

It was as if he had not seen her until that moment. Her bitterness meant nothing. He looked deep into her eyes. He saw the fine smooth texture of her skin, the clean lines of her face, her stubborn jaw and sensitive mouth. He saw the curve of her throat and the swelling of her young breasts, and suddenly she was crimson beneath his look, tipping her head forward so that he could not see her face. She was trembling, trying to twist out of his grip.

"No!" she sobbed. "No! Let me go! Please, let me go!"

For another moment he held her, and there was a queer kind of quivering deep inside of him.

"Faith!" he muttered. "Faith, if there's anything you want of me—if there's anything I can do for you—"

"How sweet!" broke in a mocking voice behind him. "Have you made a conquest, Faith honey?"

He dropped his hands. He turned. He heard the smothered sound of Faith's breath. He glimpsed something savage and greedy on Rena's beautiful face. He felt the full impact of her primitive appeal. Such a woman, he knew in that moment, could lift a man to heaven or drive him to hell. He hated her with a furious intensity of hate, and yet he knew that with a smile and a touch and a promise she could bend him to her will.

"Fool's gold!" he said between his teeth, softly. "It drives men loco!"

Her dark eyes narrowed a trifle. "You've been riding alone too much, my friend. That drives men loco, I've heard." And then she was smiling, sure of herself and of him, saying in her throaty voice: "Run along and cool off with a smoke, Don. Faith, your father wants you."

Don looked at Faith, but she went past him with her face averted. Rena laughed softly and laid her hand lightly on his arm.

"If you've fallen for her, Don honey," she murmured, "you'll have to win her stepmother's approval! Shall we talk about it—later on?"

Her touch seemed to kindle a blazing fire within him, but he glowered at her. "Who said anything about falling for anybody? I'm ridin' the grub line."

"Did lack of money or a job ever stop a man—or a woman—from falling in love?" She stood close to him so that the intoxicating warmth of her body flowed about him, adding its measure to the heat that blazed within him. "You're not a fool. Stop talking and acting like one. What a man wants, he takes—if he can get away with it!"

Then she was gone, leaving him to stand there like a man suddenly released from a flood. He shuddered, breathing hard and unsteadily. He ground an oath between his teeth, savagely, and wheeled and stalked out into the darkness of the early evening.

THE THIN disc of a new moon hung above the ragged peaks of the mountains westward. The sky was thick with stars. The pungent scent of pine and sage and parched grass blended with the indescribable aroma of the cooling earth. On a hilltop north of the ranch a coyote barked, and like an echo came the reply from a more distant hill eastward. The munching of his horse in the corral was a contented sound,

but the stirrings of the two saddled horses that stood nearby struck a discordant note. He walked slowly to the corral and turned his shoulders against the fence. He shoved his hat to the back of his head and dipped into the pocket of his shirt for tobacco and papers.

"Thing to do," he muttered, "is drift."

The brief flare of the match cast his angular features into sharp relief. His wide lips were tight about the cigarette and his eyes squinted. He exhaled smoke through his thin nostrils and set this foot upon the dropped match and knew that he should saddle up and ride. His every instinct told him this. He got his saddle from the shed and carried it to the corral and laid his hand upon the gate to open it. But he did not open it. For suddenly he seemed to hear Faith's voice say: "Well, what are you?"

For a long moment he stood there, his hand on the gate, seeking the answer to that question. Slowly, then, he turned and picked up his saddle and carried it back to the shed, where he unloosened his thin bedroll and carried it into the dark and empty bunkhouse and left it on one of the beds along with his gunbelt and gun.

He was smoking his third cigarette when Blake and Safford came out of the house. He saw Rena standing in the door way, her splendid figure silhouetted against the light, her golden hair ablaze with it. Then she followed the two men toward the waiting horses and the indistinct murmur of their voices drifted to him as they talked. Beyond them, inside the kitchen, he saw Faith moving about and heard the clatter of dishes. When she appeared in the door with the water pail in her hand, he stepped down from the corral fence and met her at the well.

CHAPS

Of course every reader of this magazine knows that the seatless leather pants the cowboys wear to fend off brush and to give their legs a better grip on saddle leather are called chaps, pronounced "shaps." Like many another cowboy term, this one is derived from Spanish, for it was from the Mexican *vaquero* that the first Texas cowhands borrowed the custom of wearing them. To trace the origin of the word further, *chaparra* in North American Spanish means a thorn-bush, and *chaparral* a thicket of thorn-brush. Thus when the *vaquero* devised leather leggings for protection in riding through *chaparral*, he called them *chaparreras*—literally, "thorn-brushers." Many of the first *gringos* to use them called them "brush-fenders," but it has now been a long time since any cowboy called them anything but "chaps."

Some authorities claim that the Spanish word is *chaparrejos* instead of *chaparreras*, and Westerners often argue over which is correct. But, as I once heard a cowpuncher say, "It ain't hardly worth while arguin' over. *Chaparreras—chaparrejos*—either way they still ain't got no seat in 'em!"

——*Phil Squires*

"Drawin' water is my specialty," he drawled gently, taking the pail from her. "Told you if you wanted anything, just to holler, didn't I?"

"Not that I remember," she said. "But thanks, anyhow."

She stepped back and turned a little, looking at the three who stood near the horses, blurred shapes in the darkness. One of the men said something he did not catch. Then Rena's throaty laugh rang out and her voice came clearly.

"Nice having a husky man around!"

HE HEARD Faith's breath catch, and again that ugly thing was there, too vague and formless to be identified, but horrible. His nerves leaped taut and he sent a swift glance toward the girl. She stood stiff and straight in the dim star light, her hands clenched at her sides. But she said nothing. He filled the pail and as he turned the two men were swinging up into their saddles. Rena went into the house immediately, but when Don carried the pail in he was relieved to find that she was not in the kitchen.

"Nothin' like a stack of dishes to get folks acquainted," he said, turning his slow smile upon the grey-eyed girl. "My ma raised me proper. I'm right handy with a dish cloth, ma'am."

Her answering smile was shy, making her look very young and sweet, in spite of the shadow of trouble lurking deep in her eyes. The combination moved him deeply. It came to him that if the older woman had the power to lift a man to heaven or drive him to hell, the heaven of this girl's making would be far more enduring and vastly more satisfying.

By the time the dishes were done, he was sure of this. There were depths in her that he failed to plumb, but this only made him the surer of her essential fineness. Her appeal was utterly unlike that of Rena. It humbled him, made him aware as he had never been of the futility of his fiddle-footed existence. It filled him with a kind of bitter self-contempt.

"Thanks a lot, Don," she said at last, shaking out her dish cloth. "You've been a big help." And then her glance traveled away from him and her smile faded and she sighed, murmuring as if to herself: "I'll not be washing many more dishes here. But I suppose it's the right thing to do, if it will make Dad well again. Only—" She sighed and blinked her eyes, not looking at him.

Never had he yearned so powerfully for anything as he yearned then to comfort her. But he did not touch her or speak. He had nothing to offer her.

"Is there anything you need to make you comfortable?" she asked, after a moment. "The bunkhouse hasn't been used for quite a while. I'm not sure—"

"Don't you worry about me, ma'am," he broke in quietly. "Good night."

It seemed very dark outside and the thin mountain air had taken on a definite chill. Midway across the yard he glanced back and saw the light go out in the kitchen. The stillness and the loneliness closed in about him then, and a feeling came to him like a never to be satisfied hunger. He did not know what to make of it. He was moved again by a strong urge to saddle up and ride away.

A few hours ago, riding across the high valley to this ranch, he had been a fairly contented man who needed only a square meal to make him wholly so. Now he was a stranger to himself. He took a stride toward the corral, and wheeled abruptly toward the bunkhouse, caught in a cross current of uncertainty.

THE DARKNESS of the bunkhouse repelled him. He approached it with the intention of getting his bed and taking it out into the open. The door was wide as he had left it. He stepped across the threshold and halted, his nerves quivering. A soft laugh came out of the darkness and hands touched him, and he saw the faint blur of her face as she pressed close to him.

"Surprised?" she murmured.

"What are you doin' here?" he demanded roughly, moving back a little.

She laughed her warm throaty laugh. "I came to make sure you'd be comfortable, Don honey. Brought you a nightcap drink and a pillow and some blankets. I even made up a bed for you with my own hands.

Doesn't that thrill you?" She laughed again.

"That ain't the word for it," he said dryly. "But I'm obliged, Mrs. Barnett. Good night!"

Even in the darkness he seemed to see the flash of her eyes. But it was not her anger that scared him.

"So!" she breathed. "You have fallen for her! I told you we'd talk about it—later. Remember?"

"Good night, Mrs. Barnett," he said again.

He thought she would strike him then, and his own anger was so near the boiling point that he wasn't sure what the consequences might be. But she did not strike him. She laughed.

"Good night, fool!"

He heard the swish of her skirts, the click of her heels. He glimpsed her briefly in the doorway, her white arm reaching back. Then she was gone and the door slammed shut behind her.

An unsteady breath went out of him. He drew his hand across his face and found it wet. He fumbled through the darkness and slumped down on the edge of a bunk. How long he sat there, he did not know. The scent of perfume and the vibrant memory of the woman's strange personality lingered. He knew that she was as evil as sin. He wondered how Cass Barnett had met her, and why such a woman would marry a crippled old man. And suddenly again he was aware of the nameless ugly thing lurking in the darkness. He knew that he would not leave this ranch until he had talked again with Faith.

At long last he stirred out of his abstraction. The woman's scent mingled with the stuffiness of disuse in the bunkhouse. He fumbled his way to the door. It was several minutes before he realized why he could not open it.

"I'll be damned!" he said aloud.

He started to laugh, but then the ugly thing lurking in the darkness seemed to snarl a little and a tingling stirred his hair roots. Wheeling, he struck a match and looked for a lamp. He found the bracket where a lamp had hung, but no lamp. He saw a pitcher and a tin cup and a whisky bottle on a stand beneath the empty bracket. He did not touch them. He was angry now, and a little bit scared.

STRIKING matches, he went around the single long room. It had bunks on either side, a stove near the middle in a square patch of floor, a small window at each end. There was but the one door and that opened inward. It could not be forced. The windows were very small and they were nailed in securely. He went to the bunk where he'd left his warbag and fumbled through it for his gun. The gun was gone. The nameless thing in the darkness snarled a little louder. Cold sweat broke out all over him.

Cursing his jumpy nerves, he rolled a cigarette. The flare of the match fell upon the pitcher and cup and bottle on the stand. He uncorked the bottle and poured a stiff drink into the cup. The smell of the raw whisky turned his stomach. With an oath, he hurled the cup against the wall. And then, for a few seconds, he stood in the darkness, puffing nervously at his cigarette. The stench of the spilled whisky washed around him, killing the scent left by the woman.

"I've got to get out of here!" he muttered. "I've got to get out fast!"

He set his foot on the dropped cigarette and took a blanket from his bed. There were four small square panes in the windows. He selected the window farthest from the house and broke the panes one at a time, using the blanket to deaden the sound and protect his hands. The frame tore loose with a splintering sound. He stood back from the window, holding his breath.

The stillness was like no other stillness had ever been. The starlight outside seemed almost as bright as day. He would make a fine target squirming through that small opening, but he had to take that chance. He went out head first, twisting his wide shoulders to gain the maximum diagonal width. It was a tight squeeze.

Glass splinters ripped his shirt and stung his flesh. But once his shoulders were through, the rest was easy. He landed chest down across a bush that crackled beneath his weight. Scrambling up, his foot struck a tin can and sent it skittering. He flattened

back against the wall, his nerves like taut bowstrings.

For half a minute he stood there, while his breathing steadied, his ears and eyes sifting the darkness. Nothing moved that he could see. No sound came to him but a gusty sigh from his corralled horse. Swiftly he cat-footed around to the front of the building, facing across the yard toward the rear of the house. The house was dark. He heard the thump of his heart, the rasp of his breath. The thin disc of the moon hung just above the ragged backbone of the mountains. The stars overhead were thick and the air held a knife-edged chill. He stood there for a long time, baffled by the peaceful quiet that enveloped the entire CXB ranch.

AT LAST he went across the yard to the kitchen door. It was closed. The stillness inside and outside the house held unbroken. He made a complete circuit of the house, which proved exactly nothing. He lost track of the elapse of time as he waited, not knowing what he waited for. Presently he discovered that the moon had slipped down behind the mountains. And still nothing happened.

The chill bit into him, and weariness dragged at him. He began to wonder if he had indeed ridden alone too long. Loco was the word for it. It made a horse balk at a straw and jump in terror at a shadow. Maybe everything that had taken place here had taken place only in his imagination.

So strongly did he suspect this as the minutes crawled past in endless procession that he went back to the bunkhouse. The door was locked. The key was on the outside. That much, at least, was real. And the faint sound that suddenly disturbed the brooding quiet, that was real, too. It turned him around fast. Somewhere south of the ranch, horses were walking.

For a moment he listened and as he listened he seemed to hear the snarl of the nameless ugly thing that lived here at this lonely ranch. He went back across the yard and faded into the concealing darkness beneath the roof of the open sided blacksmith shed. His groping hand touched the cold metal of an anvil. It closed upon the handle of a small sledge. His lips thinned against his teeth.

The walking horses must have been quite near when he heard them, for suddenly he saw them rounding the west side of the house. A slight scraping sound caught his ear. The back door was open. The tall form of a woman loomed against a faint yellow glow of lamp light. When she stepped out into the yard, the way she moved was unmistakable. His breath hissed softly. Then the two horses stopped and the riders stepped down. They were near enough so that he heard their low pitched voices distinctly.

"All set?" asked one of the men. "Did he sign that power-of-attorney?"

"Said he would, didn't I?" the woman replied. "What kept you so long?"

"Aimed to give you time enough," Kemp Blake said. "How'd you get rid of that damn drifter? Hell of time for him to show up!"

Rena's warm throaty laugh sent a chill along Don's spine.

"He's going to be a big help, Kemp honey! I locked him in the bunkhouse with some whisky doped with what was left of the old man's sleeping medicine. And I've got his gun. We'll use that—and he'll hang, damn him!"

"Damn you!" growled Blake. "Changin' the plan—"

"This is a better one," Rena declared. "It will put us in the clear. A grub line rider gets drunk and turns wolf. He tries to get fresh with me and Faith and the old man busts in and gets killed. So does the girl. You show up just in time to plug the killer. It's perfect!"

THERE WAS a moment of silence while Don Fortune's blood ran cold.

"Lady," Safford breathed, "I'd sure as hell hate to get you sore at me!"

"You she-devil!" Blake muttered thickly. "Good God! I don't—"

But Rena was moving toward the house, her golden hair flaming in the star light, her body swaying with its strange seductive grace.

"Come along," she said. "We'll fetch him in after the rest is done."

They followed her as the watching cowboy knew men would always follow her.

And Don shuddered and drew the back of his left hand across his forehead and gripped the handle of the sledge and followed them. They entered the house, leaving the door open. He was within a stride of it when a piercing scream blended with the blast of a gunshot somewhere inside. He was half across the kitchen when he heard Rena cry out.

"Grab her! Get that gun! Faith, you fool—"

The thunder of another shot rocked the house. Don plunged into a narrow hallway and pulled up at a door that opened into a lighted bedroom. Cass Barnett lay inertly upon the bed. Beyond it two women fought furiously for possession of a long barreled revolver. He glimpsed Faith's desperate white face. He saw the older woman slam her against the wall, twisting the gun up and back. The two men were in between. Safford leaped across the bed. Blake circled around the end of it.

The sledge took Blake on the side of the head and knocked him sprawling. It clunked into the wall inches from Safford's head. The hatchet-faced man swung around with a startled oath and went for his gun. Don plunged down upon Blake and rolled to his heels with the black-haired man's gun in his hand. Safford's shot cut a swathe through his red hair. His slug drove into the crook's chest and slammed him against the wall, where he slid down slowly.

The boom of another shot came as an echo of those two. A hot breath scorched Don's left cheek. He leaped up and to the right. Rena, her red lips curled back from her small white teeth, again leveled his own gun at him. But as she pulled the trigger, Faith leaped and wrapped both arms about her and flung her to the floor. The bullet missed Don by a yard. He jumped to lend the grey-eyed girl a hand, but she needed no help. With a knee between Rena's shoulders, she grabbed the long barrel of the gun, jerked out of the other woman's grasp. She struck the butt of it down upon her stepmother's golden head.

"You killed him! You tricked him and robbed him and killed him! You—"

She lifted the gun to strike again. Don caught the weapon and pulled it from her.

"Easy, ma'am!" he panted. "Killin' her won't undo what's been done."

She stared back at him, crouching there with her knee on the other woman's back. The blaze of madness died out of her eyes. A shudder shook her slender form. Her head tipped forward and she covered her face with her hands, sobbing great deep sobs that seemed to tear her heart out.

LATE THE following afternoon Don Fortune stood beside Faith Barnett on the porch of the CXB ranch house, watching a stream of dust settle along the road. Rena Barnett was on her way to stand trial for murdering her husband, and Kemp Blake would stand trial with her. The sheriff had also taken Safford's body away. Cass Barnett lay in his last sleep on a knoll west of the house, where Faith's mother had waited his coming. An atmosphere of peace enveloped the ranch now, and Don knew that it was time for him to saddle up and ride on again.

"Will you be goin' to town this evenin', ma'am?" he asked.

She looked at him, her grey eyes free of shadows and a new maturity about her that made her much too lovely. She would marry some man, he supposed, who would help her re-stock her ranch. Some man who could give her at least part of what she deserved. Some man who hadn't wasted his life riding the grub line, seeking something he'd never defined until it was too late.

"Yesterday," she murmured, smiling a little, "you told me that if there ever was anything I wanted you to do for me, I had only to holler. Remember?"

He remembered. And suddenly he was rigid and yet shivering, too, deep inside of him. He tried to look away from her but could not. She could not possibly mean—

"I'm hollering, Don!" she breathed. "Can't you hear me?"

And then somehow she was in his arms, clinging to him, lifting her lips to meet his hungry kiss. Nothing else, he discovered, mattered in the slightest.

Come Ride With Me

by W. T. Ballard

THE WAY to happiness was not an easy one for a lonely man like Lee—not even with the help of a small boy and his proud sister

"YOU stayed away a long time," had been Clay Forester's greeting as Lee pulled the saddle from the big bay. "I suppose you've come home for your share, now that father's gone?"

Lee turned at the words. The man at his side was taller than he, with the same dark face, the same powerful body, the same grey eyes.

But the sameness was external only and they both knew it. "Your guess is good." Lee Forester hadn't intended to say that. He'd ridden five hundred miles to say something very different. He had hoped that common grief might draw them together as nothing else had ever done. But in one instant of flashing insight he knew that the hope was vain.

He saw his brother's face tighten at the words, heard the grudge in his voice as he said, "Come in when you finish."

Lee Forester led the bay into the new barn. He grained the horse and made certain the wild hay was sweet, sorting the weed stalks from it with his hands. A horse was something you could care for, something you could trust. He put the saddle in the harness room, then catching up the blanket roll and saddle bags moved toward the house.

His boot heels making hollow sounds along the gallery warned them of his coming and his sister's lips parted in a smile of welcome which was not real. Lee searched her face for change which he did not find.

"Welcome home," she said, her stiff lips making the words mechanical and without meaning. "Your old room's waiting."

He made no effort to kiss her. As long as memory he could recall no gesture of affection at the Circle F. It was said that the Circle F had no friends and few enemies. The family minded its own business and ignored what went on beyond the borders of the ranch. It was this very remoteness which had driven Lee Forester from the house. Even as a boy he had felt like an interloper, and three years absence had increased the feeling.

The feeling increased at dinner that night. "I'm going to make a suggestion," Clay Forester said hesitantly. "You and I never saw things the same way. I doubt if we could ever operate the outfit together. Therefore I offer two alternatives—either you sell out to me, or I'll manage the ranch and send you your share each season. I prefer to buy you out, but if you don't want to sell, I'll insist that you give me a free hand."

Lee Forester's lips twitched, then were still. He glanced at Clara and saw that his sister was carefully not looking in his direction. "Do you agree with Clay, Clara?"

She looked around, startled. "What have I to do with it? Father chose to leave the ranch to you boys."

"I'll never give Tony up," she said. "He's all I've got"

His old impatience surged up within him, making his tone bitter when he had intended no bitterness. "It has a great deal to do with you," he said, harshly. "This is your home and always will be. You're part and parcel of this house and you should have full say as to how it is run. Would you rather that I went away?"

She plucked at the tablecloth. "Perhaps," she said finally. "The Circle F needs a strong hand. If you stayed there would only be dissension and wrangling. Better to sell out. You've never been happy here."

"Perhaps I'm being stubborn," he said, "but I know one thing. My father left me this ranch and not to sell. I've wandered for three years without finding what I was after. A man is only running away from

himself when he wanders on. I'm back to stay. You'll have to make the best of it, and if we clash, that clash was in the cards long before any of us were born."

He rose, conscious that neither had attempted to answer. He went out on the long gallery and smoked and looked at the hills, distant and empty and alone. Like himself, he thought. Lonely out there in the moonlight under the arch of star-splashed sky, as alone as the coyote who sent his yapping toward the moon. It was a homecoming which could not have been worse.

THE town was worse than Lee remembered, its wooden sidewalks weathered and sagging in midweek emptiness, its wooden awnings listing and paint-starved. Like so many Western towns, it was divided by the gleaming rails of a railroad. In reality, he thought, Sandsone is two towns, side by side, with the railroad station and the shops their only point of contact; two civilizations existing independent of each other, two groups set apart by languages, customs, beliefs. There was a third group, his group, the ranch people who had little in common with either of the towns. To them Sandsone was a necessity, and they used it without love.

The four blocks of stores on one side of the tracks were dark, with a dozen saloon windows making yellow patches in the night. Beyond the tracks sprawled the pitiful row of Mexican shacks. The station showed lights from the waiting room and the big lunch counter beyond. He saw a few dim figures on the street, a few patient horses at the long hitching-rails.

Lee stood at the sidewalk's edge, looking first right, then left. This was the spot he had ridden thirty miles to reach, the spot to which he had been driven for companionship by his brother's silence, his sister's disapproving eyes. But there had been no companionship for him at the Sandsone Bar, where he had hopefully spent the evening.

The wind whipped at his shoulders as he walked down the street toward the lights of the station lunch room. Not until he had almost reached the door did he see the slight figure huddled in the darkness, peering in at one of the windows.

He almost passed without speaking, but curiosity made him pause to say, "You're out late, youngster."

The boy turned. He seemed very small, his body, too tall and not filled out, wrapped in a sweater which was almost as large as an overcoat. It was dark on the porch, but the shaft of light from the window fell directly on his face, showing the small, sharp nose, the peaked whiteness of features, the big, dark eyes.

"I'm waiting for Kate. I won't let her walk home alone. I wait every night."

"Ah," said Forester. "You're right young to be waiting for your girl."

"My sister," said the boy. "She's the cashier in the restaurant. She practically runs the place."

"I'm sure she does." The man had little interest, but there was a waver in the boy's tone as if he were chattering with the cold. "Why don't you wait inside?"

"Kate won't let me," said the boy. "She says that Mr. Desmond doesn't like it. I'm not supposed to wait for her at all, but I do. I stand here until I see her about to leave, then I run across the tracks and pretend I'm just coming from the shack."

Forester glanced through the window. There was a small girl at the cashier's desk, a small girl with red hair which shone softly under the glare of the swinging lamps.

"She has no business to let you stay out here in the cold," he said harshly. "Who is this Desmond?"

"He's the superintendent of the division," said the boy. "He's tough. He used to be

a stagecoach driver. Kate says he's cleaned up the line. They used to have holdups in the hills but everyone's scared of Desmond."

"She is too, apparently," Forester said. "Come on. You can go in with me. From the look of you, you could use a sandwich and some hot tea."

The boy hung back. "Oh, I couldn't. I'm not supposed to go in there. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger," said Forester. "My name's Lee. What's yours?"

"Tony," said the boy, hesitation deep in his voice. "Tony Worth. I used to live in Chicago."

"I've been there," said Forester. "I didn't like it much."

Neither do I," the boy admitted. "I like it better here. Old Pedro's going to get me a horse. He promised."

"Who's Pedro?"

"He's the Mexican who owns the building where we live. He's nice."

"I'll bet he is," said Forester. "But you're coming in with me and get something warm. Even Mr. Desmond couldn't object if we paid for it."

"I guess not but. . . ."

"No buts," said the man, taking the boy's arm and half pushing him toward the door. "Move along, pardner, I don't want to eat alone."

THE place was almost empty. A few trainmen idled at the counter and off in the far corner a group of mechanics from the roundhouse quarreled among themselves.

The girl at the cashier's desk looked up. She saw the boy and half rose, motioning toward him angrily. Tony stopped. He turned like a trapped rabbit and tried to brush by, but Forester had him by the shoulder.

"Steady, pardner. There's nothing to worry about. You and I eat."

He led the unwilling boy toward the counter and almost forced him onto a stool. He didn't glance around but he was conscious that the red-haired girl had left her place at the desk and was moving toward them.

"I've asked you not to come here." She had a nice voice, but there was anger in it now. "I've told you time and time to stay at home." There was a break in her voice. "Please, Tony."

The boy squirmed. Forester said, "Lay off the child. If you have anything to say, say it to me." He turned his stool and his grey eyes met hers levelly. "He didn't want to come. I brought him in here because he was alone outside and because I was alone. I don't like to eat alone, Miss Worth. I like to have someone to talk to."

He sensed the anger in her, sensed that it was no longer directed against the boy. He saw her eyes measure him. He knew that she had formed her opinion and that it was not good.

"You don't know what you're doing." Her voice was held level with conscious effort. "You don't understand. The orders are that Tony is not to come to the restaurant. It's part of the agreement."

"And who gave such orders?" Forester remained on the stool, his eyes cold and remote and hard. He found that he did not like this girl. There was anger in her, but there was also fear, and he did not like people who were afraid.

"I did." The man must have followed them through the door. He was as tall as Forester and heavier. His face was thick-lipped, a little sensual, but the eyes were hard and cold. "We have a rule here that employees' families are not admitted during working hours."

"This is a public eating place," said Forester. He had no desire to quarrel with this man, but all the pent up ill-temper of the last few days was crowding him. "You'll see we're served, since you seem to be in charge."

Forester had not moved, yet his whole manner had changed. His body, which had been loosely slack, had tightened into a tense machine.

"You're Lee Forester," Desmond said. "I recognize you from the description. The town has been waiting ever since your return. They tell me that you're dynamite."

Forester laughed.

The man went on. "I want no trouble with you here. The train is due. It'll bring two hundred customers." He glanced at

the waitress behind the counter. "Serve them, Emma." He turned then and walked toward the end of the dining room, disappearing through the door marked "ticket office."

The red-haired girl's breath escaped slowly. "I hope you're satisfied," she said to Forester. "There goes my job." Then she turned and went back to her desk. The boy was quiet, white-faced, watching. He couldn't eat, barely touching the food which the waitress set before him.

FORESTER failed to understand what impulse had caused him to wait, but now stood beside the baggage truck and looked off at the rim of distant hills.

The boy was saying, "You'd better go. Kate's mad, and when she's mad, she doesn't care who knows it."

At least, he thought, it was better to have an angry woman to talk to than not to speak at all.

The noise of the wind covered her steps and he was not conscious of her presence until she stood at his elbow. "I told you to go home." She was speaking to the boy.

"And I told him to wait." Forester had turned and was facing her. "I wanted a chance to explain."

"There's nothing to explain. Come, Tony."

The boy slipped from the baggage truck and took her hand. They walked the length of the platform with Forester following, and stepped out onto the windswept tracks. Not until they had crossed and turned along the row of Mexican shacks did the girl seem aware of his presence. She stopped then and turned.

"It isn't necessary for you to follow us."

"It is," said Forester. "You shouldn't be in this part of town alone at this hour of the night."

Her laugh was a little scornful. "I've made this walk every night for the last six months, at this hour of the night, Mr. Forester, and until this evening no one has troubled me."

Forester flushed in the darkness. This girl decidedly had the ability to reach him with her words. "I'm sorry if you think I'm troubling you," he said. "I wanted to explain about bringing the boy into the restaurant."

"It isn't necessary."

"To me it is."

She sensed the innate stubbornness of the man with a little feeling of desperation. But to her surprise she did not fear him. "Come, then," she said and turned into one of the shacks.

The interior was surprising. Blankets of gay colors had been used for drapes, hiding the bare walls, and he noted that the place was very clean.

"Sit down."

There was no place to sit save on one of the two beds, and he sank uneasily onto its edge. The boy was nervous, ill at ease, feeling the tension within the room yet not understanding it.

Forester cleared his throat. "It's hard

The girl caught her breath. "That hill

for me to talk, and to talk with a stranger is harder still."

"There's no need to talk."

"There is." He was dogged. "You're looking at a lonely man, Miss Worth. I don't know how much, if anything, you know about me."

She said honestly, "I've heard that you were the black sheep, that you were wild. I understand your family did not approve and that there was no warm welcome at your return. The town might have taken your side, since your relatives are not over-popular, but you spurned their well meant efforts."

"A bunch of busybodies," was what he said. "A crowd of ghouls hanging on the edge of a family feud."

"You trust no one," she looked at him.

"I trust the boy." He reached out and drew Tony into the circle of his arm. "Children are fundamentally honest, their likes and dislikes are sharp and clear. Give him to me."

THE girl was startled. "I'm sorry, I must have misunderstood you, Mr. Forester."

"There's nothing to misunderstand," said Forester. "I'm asking that you give the boy to me. I have enough for two. I can arrange that he has proper care, a decent place to live and what he needs. In return I'll have a companionship I lack, someone who will be glad when I ride in. Someone who will listen when I talk, and after a while perhaps, someone who might be a little proud of me."

—that's where you want to build . . . A woman would be a fool to refuse."

Her cheeks had flushed, and her voice sharpened. "Please, Mr. Forester, Tony and I are quite competent to look after our own affairs. We—"

He cut in rudely. Something in this girl brought an unusual harshness to his voice. "I'm not a polite man, Miss Worth. You're talking nonsense and you know it." He glanced about the room, and his meaning was very clear.

"You're not a cruel person, but you are a selfish one. No, wait," he continued as she tried to speak. "You pride yourself at the moment that you're caring for your brother. You work at a job which you no doubt detest. But does it occur to you that Tony needs something further than a place to sleep, a little bit to eat? He needs to belong. It isn't good for him to stand outside that restaurant, barred from entering because of some silly rule. Things like that leave their marks on a child."

"You don't understand. Mr. Desmond has been very kind."

"To hell with Mr. Desmond," said Lee Forester.

"And Tony's sick," she said. "We had to come here, and there was no money. The Mexicans were kind."

"They're always kind," he said. "They're kind because they understand hunger and poverty and misery as the other side of town will never understand." He indicated the section of Sandsone which lay across the tracks. "They'd want to help; but they can't give the kind of help Tony needs."

The girl shrugged. "I'll never give Tony up. He's all I've got, and I mean to keep him. We'll stick it out together, Tony and I."

"Even though it's not good for him? Even if he has to live here, cut off from the other children of the town, not allowed in the station dining room?"

"Even so," She met his eyes steadily.

He shrugged and rose. His face was dark and bitter and self-contained as he said good night. "I'm not going to give up," he told her. "I'll be back again."

She smiled tightly, shaking her head. "I'll never give up either, Mr. Forester."

He walked over to the livery barn, where he'd left his horse for protection against the night's cold. Without really meaning to he found himself turning the horse's head in the direction of Mexican town, his eyes held by the glow from the shack he had just left. Before the shack he pulled in a little, and his mount, resenting any delay in the trip home, unkinked his back in a few impatient bucks. Lee rode them easily, straight up in the saddle. And then he noted, pressed closed against the glass of a window, the pale, small face of Tony, big-eyed and lost-looking. For a minute he almost got down, but the scorn he knew he'd meet in a pair of grey eyes under red-gold hair sent him on.

He gigged his horse into a fast run. As long as a man could ride, he told himself, looking down at the range stretched before him, he could be the master of his fate. Whatever a woman did or didn't do couldn't matter too much.

THE boy opened the door in answer to Lee's knock a month later. His dark eyes lighted at sight of Forester and he said, eagerly, "I thought you weren't coming any more. I was afraid."

"Afraid?" the man carried his parcels into the single room. The air was close, but at least very warm.

"Afraid I wouldn't see you again," the boy said. "We're—we're going away."

Forester had laid the packages on one of the beds and was engrossed in unwrapping them. "Away—where?"

"I don't know. There was trouble in the dark eyes. "Kate didn't tell me. She was crying last night. She said we'd go away."

Forester thought it over soberly, but the boy's attention was caught by the packages. "What's there?" He had come closer and was peering over Forester's arm. "For me?" He caught up the hat and thrust it on his head. Then he saw the boots.

"They're just like yours," he said. His tone was incredulous. He hugged them against him until he saw the chaps. Ten minutes later he was dressed in the new finery, strutting back and forth across the small floor space of the cabin.

They were both laughing at his attempts to rope the bed post when the door opened and Kate came in. She brought wind and

snow with her, and she was so busy with her packages and the door that she did not see the visitor until he stepped forward to help.

"I thought I asked you not to come here," was her only greeting.

"You did," he said. "But I'd already ordered stuff for Tony's Christmas. We were snowed in and I couldn't make town then. Today will have to do."

Not until then did she notice her brother's costume. For an instant a protest trembled on her lips. It died as she saw the animation of the boy's face. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure."

Forester said roughly, "There's nothing kind in me, Miss Worth. I don't need to explain that I did this for my own pleasure, and for that alone."

She nodded. "I'm beginning to believe you."

"Then don't spoil it by trying to refuse these gifts. In the spring I'll find a pony for the boy."

"I don't think we'll be here in the spring," she told him. "This is my last month at the restaurant."

He remembered the boy's words and was suddenly appalled. "But where are you going?"

"I don't know, as yet."

"But why?"

"That," she told him calmly, "is none of your business."

"Desmond," he said with sudden insight. "I'll speak to him." He picked up his hat from the place on the bed, but she caught his arm.

"Wait, please! You have no right to interfere in this. You'll only make matters worse. You don't understand."

"I think I do." He took a further step despite her restraining hand, but she stopped him by placing her small body between him and the door.

"I tell you it will do no good. I can't stay here. I won't, no matter what you do to Desmond."

FOR a long instant his eyes searched her face, then he turned and looked at the boy, and suddenly he smiled. It was a tight-lipped smile and there was bitterness in it as there was bitterness in all he did now.

"I judge friend Desmond offered you a choice. Was marriage mentioned in it?"

"There was," she said, "but there was no place for Tony."

"I'll offer a choice," he told her, "and it might be an improvement on the one Desmond gave. I want the boy, and apparently Desmond doesn't. You refuse to give him up, so you're leaving the country, taking him away. Stay here instead. Marry me."

He heard the sound of her quick-caught breath. Her face had flushed. "You don't mention love," she said, "not even love for Tony. You want him, yes. You want him for a break in your own loneliness, but it's a selfish want. In your own way you're as cruel as Hugh Desmond. At least he spoke of love."

Lee Forester made an impatient gesture. She was so small, her head hardly level with his shoulder, yet the fear which he had sensed in her the first night was strangely missing. It was as if, having made her decision, she was no longer afraid.

"Love's something I don't understand," he told her shortly. "I've seen people do many things in the name of love. To me it's something without permanence. There never was much in our home. Even as a boy I had only myself to turn to.

"But this I know. I want the boy. I offer him security, and since I must, I offer you the same thing, nothing more. If we can live without hating each other, we'll have enough. Few people that I know have ever had much more."

The flush had died from her cheeks. "At least," she told him slowly, "you're honest. You don't pretend."

"Well then, it's settled." He had back his confidence. "The roads are breaking up. Two days more, unless the thaw fails to hold, and we can get through the canyon with a buckboard. I'll show you a hill out there, a hill on which we'll build our house in the spring. You'll like the country and the view."

"You go too fast. I haven't said I would. A woman needs a chance to think."

"Think, then," he told her. "But reserve

judgment until you've seen the land where your house will stand."

"My house," she repeated the words, half to herself.

"Your house," he said, and turning, left.

THE sun was bright and the Chinook wind warm. This was an interim to rest men of their weary winter weight, to give the starved cattle a tiny respite. It would be cold agan, and another blizzard would howl down to fill the pass. But now he could put into action the plan he'd had since his talk with Kate. His blanket coat was too warm and he loosened it as he strode toward the Sandsone livery.

The team was shaggy in their winter coats. "They have the devil in them," said the livery man. "It comes from too much grain and no regular exercise. Better watch them, Forester."

Lee wanted to say that he knew horses and the road, but he held his tongue. The team after all was not his property. In silence he helped make fast the traces, then mounted to the buckboard's seat. There were robes which he doubted they'd need, but he left them in the rear seat out of long experience.

The horses' feet made sucking, splashing sounds. He knew that the town, its curiosity winter-edged with lack of interesting things, watched his progress with an avid eye.

He drove across the tracks and pulled to a pause before the Worth's shack. The horses were restless, and they did not like the mud. He dared not step down, but merely called.

He had a fleeting fear that the girl would not come out, in spite of his having sent her word. He cared nothing for the opinion of the town, but he had a man's natural fear of being laughed at. He called again, and this time the door opened and they appeared.

A glance showed him that Tony wore the new clothes under the big sweater and he knew a moment's pride. There was the color of excitement in the boy's face and his dark eyes were gleaming.

The girl was more restrained and merely nodded as she climbed up to the seat. He turned the team and they recrossed the tracks, passing the station platform where Desmond stood talking to two men.

Desmond turned to look, and Forester was conscious of his eyes as they moved along the street. He glanced sidewise at the girl, but she was looking straight ahead, her face quiet in repose.

"An audience," he said. "It will give them something to discuss on the cold nights to come."

She didn't answer and he turned his attention to the horses. They wanted to run, and after they had passed the grade, he let them out on the ten-mile level stretch to the canyon's mouth.

The sun seemed even warmer now. The wheels sloughed through the softened mud. Two miles and the team was content to lag. He took the boy between his knees and put the reins into his little hands.

He felt the small body stiffen with pride and happiness, and once he caught the girl's eyes studying his face. It seemed she was about to speak, but then she turned away.

"The country looks barren now," he said, "but it will bloom again, come spring.

There's nothing in the world like the mountain flowers."

"I find it hard," she said, "to associate you with a liking for little things."

THE only things I care about," he stared intently at the moving horses. "Are high places and the mountain meadows up under the divide. That's why I brought you out today. I wanted to show you where I mean to build my house. I've meant to build there since I was Tony's age. I won't attempt to describe it to you. You'll either feel it or you won't." He let his voice die and for a long time there was no sound save the slush of the horses' feet and the rattling groan of the old buckboard.

Within the shadow of the canyon he took

back the reins. Here the sun reached the roadway for but a few short hours each day. The snow was deeper and there was little slush.

They climbed, the team straining some at their collars now, slipping from time to time as snow balled up on their feet. Finally they reached the crest and turned into the side road and crossed the hill so that they had a view of the valley far below.

The snow lingered in patches only. Between the irregular white stretches the grass had a certain green sheen as if it, too, were waiting impatiently for spring. Two streams came down to the valley floor, one cutting in from the east to meet the larger river from the north. From their junction point they formed a bawling, coursing cascade of white water which disappeared through the canyon they had just traversed.

Between the streams was a hogback of high ground, looking down the valley and through the gap of the canyon to the flat land far beyond. In the clear air, Sandsone stood out as a slight smudge, too far away to make out details yet close enough to judge the limits of the town.

The girl caught her breath. "That hill," she pointed to the hogback. "That's where you want to build your home."

"Yours," he corrected her. "The house on the hill. The sheds and corral down by the river. A sheltered valley with water and winter feed. The smaller stream runs most of the year. It's spring fed and seldom changes temperature."

"And a garden there, with flowers and perhaps a little dam." She pointed to a small hollow.

"You'll do it then?" His voice was eager.

She said, slowly, "Any woman would be a fool to refuse. It's something that gets you. Something difficult to put in words."

Lee put a firm hand over hers for a minute, as if in acceptance of her promise. He made no further attempt to touch her, but stood tall at her side looking out across the valley.

DRIVING homeward, the boy went to sleep on Forester's shoulder. He motioned to the girl to pull out one of the rugs, for the sun had already dropped below the canyon's rim and the down draft at their backs was cold.

The road was freezing, and the horses slipped and stumbled in the ruts. Forester swore to himself. This trail could be dangerous. They had lingered too long beyond the summit. He shifted the boy into the girl's arms and gave his full attention to the driving.

There was a sharp breaking sound, and the buckboard slid sideways into a glassy rut. The front wheels seemed to come loose from the short wagon, and it rode up against the horses.

The animals jumped ahead, with Forester fighting the reins. He found time to shout to the girl to jump, to take the boy and jump, but either she did not hear or was afraid. He knew they were going over the edge before they reached the corner. There was nothing he could do. For once in his life, things were entirely beyond Lee Forester's control.

He caught at her shoulder as they went over. He had a confused sensation of being battered under a hail of falling rocks, of tasting snow and dirt. He had no feeling of being hurt. Not until he tried to struggle to his feet did he realize that he couldn't move his legs, and that one arm was of little use. He twisted, looking for the girl, for Tony, and saw movement on the slope above him.

He called weakly. He heard the sliding rock as she came down, heard her say, in a strained voice, "Tony's hurt. I—I can't rouse him." And then she realized that Forester had not stirred.

"You're hurt, too," she said. "Where are you hurt?"

He didn't know. He didn't want to think about himself. He looked at her and saw that her face was scratched, that her clothes were torn. But she seemed all right. At least she could walk, at least she was on her feet.

"I'm all right." He said it before the pain came. "I'm all right," he said again, as if by repeating the words he could make them true. "I can't get up, that's all. My legs don't seem to work, and I think my arm is snapped."

She caught her breath, but he said hur-

riedly, "Don't worry about me. It's Tony you have to think of. Where is he?"

"There," she pointed to a clump of jackpine on the canyon wall.

He said, "You can't move him. There are blankets in the buckboard, if you can locate them. There're matches in my pocket. Wrap him well. He should be warm, and he shouldn't be moved. Then build a fire. Build it up there beside him."

"But you?"

"I'll be all right," he said, and it was the last thing he remembered.

WHEN consciousness came back, he lay for minutes trying to recall where he was. There was a fire burning brightly up the slope, and he could see the shadow of the girl as she moved back and forth across the light. He stirred, realizing that blankets covered him. He tried to call, but his voice was weak and the wind whipped it away.

Pain had come to his injured arm. The minutes passed and with them fear came. *The wind, the wind,* the words sang their way through his head. It was bringing snow. He could smell it in the chill air.

He knew there was a good chance that they would not be found, that it could snow before a searching party, roused by his failure to return the team, reached the canyon. He tried to raise himself, to call to the girl, to tell her that she had better try the walk to town.

But the movement took what little strength he had. He felt himself going even before the light from the distant fire blacked out. He knew nothing more until he heard the shouts of men's voices, felt himself lifted and knew that he was being carried up to the trail.

Again consciousness came back, and once again it took effort and thought to decide where he was. He'd never seen the inside of the railroad hospital before. His eyes finally recognized the hulking bulk of Doc Cruthers, and wondered if the man were sober, for he seldom was. He wondered about Tony, and he dared not ask. He was conscious that others were in the room. It took effort to turn his head, and he found his sister at the bedside, then he saw his brother's form, big and silent and unmoving.

"How am I?" he said, and read the answer in their faces. "I'll walk, won't I? I'll ride again?" Panic such as he'd never known came up to fill him. "Tell me that I'll ride?"

His sister laid a hand across his forehead. It was cool without being reassuring, firm without being friendly. "Be quiet, Lee. The doctor says you aren't to excite yourself."

"I'm not exciting myself," he said and his voice belied the words. "I won't ride again, will I? I won't walk?"

She shook her head. "Dr. Cruthers says not. He says there's nothing to be done. But you aren't to worry, Lee. You'll be taken care of."

"In some home," he said, and all the bitterness of the future years rolled out before him in their everlasting barrenness. "A wheel chair for a riding horse."

"You'll be happier there," she said with her unfailing logic. "At the ranch you'd be miserable, watching other men ride."

HE THOUGHT, that's true, her mind meets a situation and faces it squarely. No feeling sways her from the course her brain selects.

He heard the commotion at the door and did not turn his head. Nothing, it seemed, could make the slightest difference now. And then he heard Kate's voice, angry and unafraid. "I've got to see him. I will see him. You can't keep me out."

He turned then to see her in the doorway. He heard his sister's voice, bitter and strong with dislike. "I'd think you'd stay away from here. You've caused trouble enough."

He wanted to shout, to tell them that it was not Kate's fault. He wanted to tell them that the ride was his idea. But it seemed Kate needed no help from anyone. She was in the room, she pushed his sister aside and was looking down at him. It seemed her eyes were very large and dark and filled with pleading.

"Lee," she said. "Lee Forester. Can you hear me?"

He moved his head. He wanted to tell her that he was perfectly conscious, that he

could see her, and his brother and sister, and the narrow room with its dirty yellow walls. He wanted to tell her not to worry about him.

He heard his voice. He said she wasn't to worry, that he would be all right, that there was nothing she could do. He told her, further, to go away, that he was very tired. He was tired, but it wasn't why he wanted her to depart. He did not want her to see him now.

"IT ISN'T you," she said. "It's Tony," and suddenly she was crying. "They say he's all right, that there's no reason why I should worry. But he's not all right. He needs a doctor—not that drunken fool. I haven't any money and there's no place to turn for help but to you. You thought enough of Tony to. . . ." His sister had the girl's arm and was pulling her away.

Lee Forester said, "Wait." He struggled to sit up and failed. He beat the bed with his free arm in sheer helplessness. "Wait. I'll send for any doctor in the land. I'll bring a man clear from Omaha—a specialist from New York if necessary."

"You haven't the money," his sister said.

"But I have the ranch," he told her. "Clay wants my half of the ranch. It's no good to me. Tell him to come here. Tell him to write the paper, and I'll sign. The money goes to her." He pointed to the girl. "Will you do this for me, or must I get Judge Parks?"

They did it finally after much argument. He couldn't help but see a certain satisfaction in Clay's face. At least, he thought, they're free of me, and I'm free of them. There must be some place in this world for men who no longer ride, a place where I can sit quietly and not think.

But that time had not come. There were things to do, and Kate was often in his room. She reported that a doctor was on his way, then that he had examined Tony and the boy was doing well, and then that the doctor wanted to see Forester.

"For what?" said Lee. "There isn't money enough."

"He wants to see you anyway," she said. "Are you afraid to see him or something?"

"Why should I be?"

"He'd like to examine you," she told him. "He thinks something might be done."

Lee Forester shook his head. "Not for me. There's nothing can be done. Doc Cruthers said so." He had no great faith in Cruthers, but he wanted no stranger looking at him.

The girl would not be denied. She brought in the doctor, big and sure and confident. His hands were as gentle as a woman's as they touched Forester, and he talked of the range and grass and the calf crop with a knowledge that showed a feeling and an understanding for the high country. He came back three times in the next two days, and then he said, "There's nothing I can promise, Mr. Forester. There's pressure on the spine. An operation can help, or it might hurt. The choice is yours."

Hesitation was something unfamiliar to Lee Forester. All through his boyhood he had followed his own course. But now this choice was something which he could not make.

THE girl came in and he talked to her. It seemed easy to talk to her. She was the first person in the world with whom he could feel at ease.

"I don't know what to do," he said, finally. "I don't seem to understand myself at all. A month ago I wouldn't have hesi-

tated. I'd rather have been dead than lying here, but now . . . I seem to be afraid."

She said, "There's nothing to be afraid about. It isn't fear that's holding you, it's the sudden inability of dictating decisions. This is one time when you can't rely on yourself, when you have to delegate the doing to someone else. You've never learned to trust people, Lee Forester; you trust no one but yourself."

"You mean I should trust this doctor?"

"And me," she said. "You should trust me. We made an agreement out there on that hill. You offered me a deal which I accepted. Are you going back on it?"

He said, roughly, "That deal no longer holds. It was made with the understanding that I build a house, that I set up a home for you on that hogback. That whole valley was part of the Circle F. The ranch no longer belongs to me. I sold it to my brother."

"For Tony," she said. "To bring the doctor here to look at Tony. Do you think I've forgotten that?"

"I don't want your gratitude." His voice was rough. "I have nothing to offer now. I couldn't take care of the boy now if I wanted to. I couldn't even take care of myself."

"Do you think," she asked, "if we had gone ahead and built the house, if we had married as you planned and then this had occurred, that I'd have run out on you?"

"I don't want you duty bound." He was still stubborn. "I won't have you tied up with a hopeless cripple."

"Then let the doctor operate and stop being a cripple. You can learn to ride again. I have to learn if I mean to live in this country. We can learn together. Come on, where's your nerve? Come ride with me!"

The doctor operated, and the whole town watched the result. Sandsone had not had so much excitement in its full history. But Lee Forester knew nothing of this. He lay in the bed on the morning when the doctor came. He sat there and said with unbelieving excitement in his voice, "They move!"

"It will take a long time," the man told him, examining the bandages. "It will take effort and patience on your part. You'll never be quite the man you were. There's a certain damage which never can be repaired."

"But I'll ride again?"

"Yes, and you'll learn to walk. As I said, it'll take time and patience. And you can work, if you are careful. I've explained the situation to Miss Worth."

"But why to her?"

The doctor looked at him curiously. "I understand you two are to be married," he said. "Certainly she has a right to know, to understand exactly what you both are up against."

"You're wrong," said Forester. "I won't marry her. Why should she tie her life to mine merely for gratitude?"

The doctor shook his head. "I don't know what's in your mind or why you think she's interested merely in a debt. It seemed to me that she was in love. Certainly if I know anything of women I'd say she cares for you."

"Which shows how little medical men know." Forester was vehement. "She only feels that she's bound to me. It was my money that brought you here to look at Tony. She should understand that I did it for the boy, that I'd have done it even if she hadn't been here. Tell her that, doctor, make her understand."

"Unless I knew your pulse was normal," the man said, "I'd think that you were suffering from delirium. I wasn't brought here to look at the boy. I understand that aside from a bump on the head, he suffered nothing from the accident."

FORESTER stared at him. "You must be wrong. If what you say is true, why did Miss Worth bring you here?"

"To care for you," the doctor said. He gathered up the old banadges and moved toward the door.

He shut the door, and Lee Forester lay for a long time on his back, staring up at the spider web of cracks which laced the ceiling. It was pleasant to lie here and not stir. It was pleasant to lie and dream, to think that he had only to make the effort and he would walk.

Sooner or later he would have to make the test, and if he failed, if the doctor was wrong. . . . He put the thought carefully from his mind. He wouldn't know until he tried, and he didn't want to try yet. He lay quiet until the door opened and Kate Worth came in.

She stood with her back against the door, the sunlight from the window framing her, bringing out the glint in her red hair. "What did the doctor tell you?"

He said, "A lot of things. He told me that Tony wasn't hurt, that you brought him here to check on me."

"That's true," she said it steadily. "I knew you'd have to find out sometime. I only hoped that you wouldn't find out too soon."

"Too soon for what?"

"Before you were up," she said. "Before you'd learned to walk again. I didn't want you worried."

"Worried," he said. "Worried?"

"Because I sent for the doctor. Because I made you sell the Circle F to get the money that we needed."

He shook his head a little from side to side, rolling it on the pillow. "That's what I don't understand. You were willing to marry me for the ranch—for that building site, I mean—and a house and security for you and the boy, and yet you had me sell it and you still want to marry me. Why?"

She said. "I didn't want to marry you for the ranch or the house. It just made me understand you better, taking that ride."

"Then why were you marrying me?"

She never looked away from his face. There was a straight honesty about her which kept her eyes levelly on his although her cheeks were flaming. "Why does any woman want to marry any man?"

"You mean—?" he said and stopped. That she might love him was a possibility which had not occurred to him.

"Since that first night, I think," her voice was steady. "I never expected anything in return. I saw you had no interest in me, but after that ride up the canyon, after seeing the place you loved, I felt it would be possible for me to help you build your place. I felt that that would be enough. I realize now that I was wrong. You'll walk again. You won't need me any more. I'll leave Tony with you. You and he will be better off. . . ." She was fumbling at the door.

"Wait," he said. "Come here!"

She didn't come. She had the door open.

He went after her. He had taken three steps before either realized what he was doing.

The girl heard him and turned. "Lee!" She ran forward in time to catch him as he swayed. "Lee, you walked!" but her words were muffled. Forester was kissing her. Walking was the last thing that he thought of at the moment.

"Kate," he whispered, "Kate." The old restlessness was gone. Whatever happened now, he'd never be lonely again.

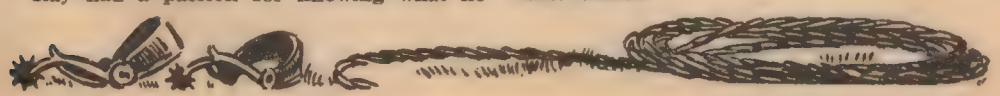
ROBERT DALE DENVER

ROBERT DALE DENVER'S first story appeared in Ranch Romances way back in May, 1925, before the magazine was a year old, and the last one we shall ever have the opportunity to publish, HURRY, DOCTOR, HURRY, was in the First November, 1946, issue. For Robert Dale Denver died this fall. And because you readers have been enjoying his stories for many years, we realize you will want to know more about him.

In the first place, Robert Dale Denver was a pen name, used exclusively in Ranch Romances, of Ray Nafziger whose Western and other stories have appeared in almost every first-class magazine. They were always in demand, both because Ray knew how to make his characters real, and because editors—and readers—could always count on his backgrounds to be authentic.

Ray had a passion for knowing what he wrote about, and that passion took him into every corner of the West to see first hand what the country was like and how the people lived. Though that same curiosity about places and people led him from coast to coast in America, down into Mexico and over to Europe, the West was the place he loved best and where he lived most of his life. He believed that in our pioneering Westerners was the spirit that makes America great; and that people today should be refreshed by it.

Just before his last illness Ray was planning a new serial for Ranch Romances. We know it would have been a good one because of our long familiarity with the high quality of his work. We are sure you readers will miss that serial and the other stories that would have followed, as we who personally knew and liked Ray Nafziger shall miss the man himself.



That Waldron Girl

By J. Paul Loomis

MONTY, though as brave as the next man, couldn't ford the river of ill feeling between himself and Lu

SPRING was late that year along the North Saskatchewan. Ross Waldron said, in a tone like the north wind that hurtled by the four persons standing bowstring tense, "I've come, Braley, to buy hay."

"So?"

The word twanged. Braley's square shoulders shrugged and his lips, under his slender, exact mustache, drew to a gratified line. Monty Rand, watching both men—and particularly Ross Waldron's tall sister Lu—never more bitterly regretted his partnership with his brother-in-law, Porter Braley, than now.

Beneath her fur cap Lu's strong face was shadowed and her dark eyes, that still did aching things to Monty, were gaunt. So were the ice-blue eyes of Ross, the oldest Waldron. With their sleds and hatrack horses the man and girl had bucked through snowdrifts here to the Wagon Wheel. The prairie ridges they crossed should have, by now, been dotted with grazing cattle and starred by purple crocus. Monty knew that Lu and Ross and their three sinewy broth-

ers had spent days and nights trying to uncover a little grass with clumsy plank snowplows for their Walking W cattle. Monty's grey eyes, though troubled, were frank. But they couldn't face the eyes of Lu.

"What's your price, you two skinflints," Ross asked, "for *our* hay?" His mittened hand waved toward four stacks.

Port said, "Don't try to pull that 'our hay' stuff." His voice was higher than need be.

"We cut an' stacked it." Monty heard an answering danger-pitch in the voice of Ross. "Sure, we were just squatting here! No one has cared a hoot about this old Nadeau place for years. But if there'd been any man in you, you'd have ordered us off when you bought this land for the Wagon Wheel last summer. 'Stead of waitin' till we finished the haying! Waitin' till the edge of winter!"

"I offered you wages."

"You can still jump in the Saskatch with your wages! You didn't get rid of us, though. We sold all of our cattle that were fit. Starved the rest through on the hay we had cut over on Horn Creek. Do *you* know what it's like to watch your stock grow ribby an' dead-eyed? To listen while their bawlin' turns to a sort of moan? Yet we'd have made it through to grass but for this last storm."

"I didn't send the blizzard." The twitch of Port's mouth said he wished he could have done just that.

Ross took a step nearer. His fists were clenched. "How much a ton do you ask?" he demanded. "Hit, hit hard, you pair of coyotes, while you've got the chance. An' pat each other on your narrow backs. It's been a long time since anyone has had the Waldrons over a barrel!"

HIS words—and the eyes of Lu—made Monty *feel* like a coyote. He'd been down to Winnipeg selling cattle last fall when Port had made his play to freeze out the Waldrons. He should have broken the newly formed partnership, if he couldn't do anything better, the day he learned of Port's hardpan dealing. But it *was* true, as Port stated, that the Waldrons' swarms of cayuses ate the grass away from profitable cows. Their knothead bulls sired scrub calves in the high-grade Wagon Wheel herds. And there was foundation for the talk that the Waldron branding iron sometimes found the flank of calves that had never nursed Walking W cows.

There was envy in that talk, also. The Waldrons seldom sweat. They broke horses, swapped horses, won nearly all the prizes at the rodeos—stampedes they were called up here. They lived with such a careless, elemental zest that drudging folk resented them. They owned no land and had no legal right to the free range. Dale Braley—Monty's sister—defended her husband's actions. So, *any* way to make this floating outfit drift on was right.

Monty looked now in the direction Lu's gaze pointed and saw Dale at a window of the fine frame house Port had just finished here—after burning the Nadeau ranch house of rotting logs in which the Waldrons used to live. What with her baby coming and the weather so rough, Dale wasn't outside much now.

But Monty wasn't surprised that at sight of Dale, Lu's long lips turned hard. Because ever since the day Monty had first seen Lu at the Grande Butte Stampede and had fallen in love with the supple rhythm of her, fallen in love with the untamed something in her eyes, the ripple in her black hair, the clear music in her laugh—since then every word Dale had said of Lu had carried barbs.

"Why doesn't someone show that Waldron girl how to dress?" Dale would say. "That Waldron girl spends so much time breaking broncs with her brothers, I can imagine how she keeps house!"

Monty hadn't told the precise Dale that she couldn't have imagined it! It had jarred him, the first time he called at the Waldrons'. But what was the use of Lu trying to keep things neat in that den of a place, after four such careless men? Still, it did affect Monty and so did Dale's lance-thrusts. And how long had it taken Lu to sense that? How long for her to hate them both?

The rasp in Ross Waldron's voice brought Monty back to where the four of them stood, here in the biting wind. "How

much," was his repeated demand, "for the hay?"

Monty leaped forward. "Port!" he said sharply, "we'll give them what hay they need till grass comes."

"Who asked you for a song?" Port lashed back. His mobile lips were lifted now. But it wasn't only his pointed front teeth that made Monty think of a rat. With a shrug of his square shoulders Port turned back to Ross. "The hay, Waldron," he said, "is forty bucks a ton. But before you buy it all you'd better look at this."

He whipped a paper from a pocket of his leather jacket and threw out the hand that held it toward Ross. Only he couldn't wait for Ross to read. "It's a pound notice," he explained. "I drove a hundred an' fifty of your worthless horses to Noren's pound yesterday for running on this range, where they've no right. Fees to release 'em are four dollars a head."

MONTY saw the windburnt skin whiten over Ross Waldron's high cheek-bones. He saw brittle lines tug at the eyes of Lu. Then he was between the two men.

"Port's crazy, Ross!" He snatched the paper. "I'll clear the horses. You take what hay you need." Something hit Monty a dizzying smash in front of the ear. It was a sideways blow from the six-shooter that was suddenly in Port's hand. "Will you shut up?" Port snarled.

Ross surged forward then and Port's gun leveled on him. "Forty a ton, cash!" Port repeated. "And stop where you are."

Ross should have read in Port's voice the shrillness of fear, more dangerous than rage. Ross had a gun too, but it was under his sheepskin coat where it was worse than useless. Contemptuously, he reached for Port. But Port yanked the trigger. Ross lurched into the snow, shuddered. When the wind had whipped away the crash of the shot he was stone still.

Instantly Lu was down beside her brother. Monty dropped also. Lu gave him a look of she-wolf fury and struck at his hand as it reached to feel inside the coat for Ross' heart.

"He's dead, Lu," Monty said.

That moment there was a scream. But it was not from Lu. Out of the house and toward them rushed Dale Braley, hysterical at the killing she had just witnessed by her husband's hand. The wind tore at her yellow hair, her smooth cheeks were chalky, her sensitive mouth distorted like that of a mask. The new snow was above her low house moccasins. At one place along the way it covered an icy patch. Dale slipped, fell hard.

With his hand still clenched on the smoking gun, Port bent above her. Monty struck him headlong. Tenderly he picked up Dale and started with her for the house. Someone opened the door for him. It was Lu.

SHE turned down the soft white blankets of the flawlessly made bed, removed Dale's moccasins and brushed the snow from her slender ankles. Monty put Dale in the bed. She moaned. Gently Lu soothed her. To Monty, Dale's finely chiseled features looked little and wan; yet Lu's strong ones seemed quivering with pain too. But Lu's voice was strong.

"I'll get her warm and take care of her. You go for a doctor." He turned. Lu caught his arm. "Ross"—she choked—"you'll bring him in?"

Monty went out to get Port. A man was riding away from the stable on Port's sorrel horse. What with the wind, he was beyond call. But Monty couldn't mistake Port's square shoulders, the way he sat a little to one side on his horse. Why? Then Monty saw two more teams and sleds approaching. He could see that the drivers were Len and Hurd, the quickest-triggered of the Waldrons. There was a crawling in Monty's stomach as he realized that Port Braley, in spite of his wife's dangerous condition, was running away!

Monty knew the Waldrons would want to hit the trail of Port. But he told them squarely what had happened and was likely to. And Hurd rode away on Monty's strongest horse through the drifts to get the doctor at Grand Butte. Len and Monty carried the body of Ross into an empty room of the house.

"Anything I can do to help you?" The wind, that was drifting snow over Port's

trail, was not more bleak than Len's voice. Monty shook his head. Len's face was hawk-like for the hunt, but he looked at the stacks of hay. "Reckon Braley'll keep," Len said, "to fill with lead some other day. While the cattle are starvin'. First I'll haul hay." Later, through the many times Monty had reason to condemn the Waldrons, he remembered from that decision that they were stockmen too.

Monty kept the house warm. He did the few things to help Lu that she asked. Hours crawled. Fear gnawed at him. Why didn't the doctor come? Had Hurd gone for him, after all? Dale's racked voice, when he heard it, was growing weaker. In the grey dawn a hushed and weary Lu beckoned him. Dale had a strong baby girl. But Dale was dead.

The doctor came at noon. He was hollow-eyed and frost-bitten. He'd been beyond Bright Lake when Hurd found him. Monty heard him praise Lu, say she'd done all that he could have done. Lu shook her head, and though she hadn't cried when Ross was shot, tears now streaked her strong face.

Lu took the baby. Monty didn't need to ask her. They'd find someone else to care for it soon, he thought. When they found Port they'd learn whether he had relatives they could take the baby to. The Mounted Police hunted for Port. So did the Waldrons. No one found a trace of him.

Spring launched upon the land now with all the north's abrupt vigor. Great arrows of snow-geese glinted their remote course across a soft sky. Calves came by the hundreds. The frost thawed from the prairie spring-holes, making them boggy traps for winter-weakened cows. Ranch help was scarce, and Monty was in the saddle all of the daylight and much of the dark. But each week he rode down to the shack by the river which the Waldrons had thrown up when Port put them off the Nadeau place—to see the baby and to find out what things were needed for her.

THEY called her Mirth because Monty thought a happy name might help offset her sorrowful start in life. Only, he didn't think this crowded shanty a happy place for her to be. He had news at last to tell Lu, one velvet May night, that a motherly woman beyond Stand-Off was willing to ruffle her feathers enough to include one more in her brood. But he found Lu and Mirth in a new cabin Lu had browbeaten her brothers into building on a knoll above a sweeping river-bend. He couldn't bring himself to speak, right then, of the arrangements he'd made.

"Have you had your supper?" A softness in Lu's question startled Monty. He'd grown already accustomed to her being as formal as himself. And it was better so, since he was imposing on Lu, who wouldn't take pay for her care of Mirth.

"I've had my supper," Monty lied.

"*Last* night, maybe—though I doubt that," Lu said. "You're gaunt and restless as a coyote. What's the matter, Monty?"

He ached to answer the warmth that was in her tone. But the word "coyote" made him wince. Ross had called him a coyote and Monty still felt there'd been truth in it. Felt that as Port's partner he should have been able to prevent the death of Lu's brother—and Dale. So his answer was short.

"I've things to think about."

"Yes," said Lu. Her Waldron pride flared at his rebuff. "We hear things, you know. About collectors hounding you, now that Port's gone. About the Wagon Wheel being plastered for all it's worth."

"More than it's worth," blurted Monty, and mentally kicked himself.

"You might as well go on," Lu told him. "Port was a wizard at stretching his credit, wasn't he? And you and Dale threw into the Wagon Wheel your entire Broken Spur outfit—high-grade, clear-of-debt cows. Now the mortgages hold every hoof. So maybe the Waldrons will be running stock along the North Saskatchewan longer than the Wagon Wheel, after all!"

She was smiling. Whether it was consolingly or exultantly was all the same to Monty. The lines sharpened along his bony jaw. "I'm sticking," he said. "Port Braley was my partner, whether I like the things he did or not. I don't leave his creditors holding the sack because he's not here. If he comes back. . . ."

"It'll be to gather lead or stretch a rope," Lu snapped.

"...comes back he won't find I've thrown his business overboard. But mainly there's Mirth. If, or when, Port's dead, three-fourths of the Wagon Wheel belongs to her. And I'm going to make it worth something, time she needs it." He was looking out at the river, whose eddies brought to life the last reflected colors of the western sky. He did not see that his determination made lights swim in the nearer, darker pools that were Lu's eyes.

MONTY found that if he were going to assume the Wagon Wheel's other liabilities he had also to shoulder its quarrels. He tried to come to an agreement with the three remaining Waldron boys—to buy them out and hire them, to divide the range. But they were bitter as alkali. Monty was now the Wagon Wheel. The Wagon Wheel had stolen their hay, killed their brother, tried to oust them from the range they'd held by a right older than grazing regulations—the right of having been there first. There wasn't, declared Hurd Waldron, room here for both outfits. And the Walking W was going to stay!

The swift, tense northern summer ripened into golden fall. There was the brief time the Saskatchewan Valley dreams, wrapt in blue Indian summer haze. But there was no moment of pause for Monty and his men. For all their riding, the Wagon Wheel cattle were always scattered from the river bars to far beyond the giant valley's rim. Some of the hay they had stacked in lonely meadows burned. When Monty cut out his steers to ship for beef his count was short. When he weaned his calves he found he had a fifty per cent crop. Seventy-five was the average he knew he had a right to expect. Several good mares were missing, and he combed the country, for Monty knew horses and was certain he could identify these no matter how skillfully the re-branding had been done. He found nothing he was looking for.

"Fight the Devil with fire," Long Fagin, the bean-pole, taciturn cowhand who had been with Monty longest advised him. "Impound Walking W stock." Monty shook his head. "I've worn that out. Hurd bought the fractional quarter of railroad land in the bend of the river where their shanty is. They're taxpayers now, with a legal right on this range."

"Let down a few rails from the fences around their haystacks," Fagin persisted. "Their own horses, winterin' out, will do almost as good as a match. With less chance of anything bein' proved."

"I'm dealing square," Monty said. Fagin puzzled him. He'd been a bronc-rider and friend of the Waldrons, particularly of Lu, when Monty first came to the North Saskatchewan.

But Walking W horses did get to Waldron haystacks. And a herd of them bunched mysteriously on the rotten ice of a brackish slough. Twenty head drowned or chilled to death in the clinging mud before the Waldrons found them. Being first of all horsemen, they purpled the air with vows of vengeance for that.

Monty grilled Fagin about it and couldn't feel that he got through the man's shell of flat denial. But he wouldn't fire him on suspicion alone. Instead he laid off less competent riders for economy's sake, did the work of four men himself instead of merely two, staved off mortgage companies with half payments and balanced his books for the year in red.

The following year in deeper red.

Monty's face had taken lines in two years it shouldn't have had in ten. Finally he'd caught Hurd Waldron swimming Wagon Wheel cattle across the Saskatchewan. Maybe, as Hurd claimed, he was only scattering them for annoyance. But driving another man's cattle without authority to do so constitutes stealing in Canadian range law. Monty swore out a warrant for Hurd's arrest.

IT WAS the day Hurd was locked up at Grande Butte that Monty appeared in mid-afternoon at Lu Waldron's cabin above the river. It was a day of mellow sunlight that was reinforced by swirls of yellow poplar leaves brought down by the October wind. A little girl, playing by the door, trotted to meet him. It brought an exclamation to his lips, the bright gold of

her curls, like Dale's had been. Then, like a sense of guilt, it struck Monty that he had never seen Mirth in sunlight before. Always he'd made his visits, of lessening frequency, after it was too dark to work any longer, when Mirth was usually asleep, when he was too tired himself to notice much.

For instance, was this the first time, he wondered, that those pretty curtains had been at the cabin windows? What a change from the old Waldron den! When too had Lu, who now came from the kitchen, stopped braiding her hair or catching it together with a ribbon, and begun piling it in those glossy, crow's-wing masses on the top of her head? It pressed deeper his old ache for her that was like a buried knife. Why had there always been things—like first his criticism of her, then the killing of Ross and this endless battle with her brothers—to keep them apart?

"You're early!" Lu said. Surprise was well reined in her voice but the color brightened in her face that was accented by her high cheek-bones. Seeing him for once without his saddle-polished chaps, she glanced out and saw the team and spring-wagon he had tied to a tree. A shadow flitted through her eyes.

Monty read their question. He was always direct. "I've come, Lu," he said, "to take Mirth home with me."

He saw pain surge back to her eyes, her hand start to her throat. He went on. He always went on with what he'd started. "You see, Lu, things can't go on the way they are, me fighting your brothers. Tomorrow I go to Grande Butte to give evidence that'll send Hurd to prison—while you're giving up everything you used to do and like on the ranch to take care of Mirth for me!"

"Have I complained about it?" Her tone was as it used to be when he first knew her. The contrast to its recent softness startled him again.

"But I don't think Dale. . . ." He stopped that. "I never meant this setup to last but a few weeks," he went on. "Anyway, at last I've found a woman—a Mrs. Haught—who'll cook for me and take care of the baby, there at the Wagon Wheel. I guess you've come to think a lot of Mirth, but things couldn't," he repeated, "go on this way."

"I understand," Lu said. Her voice wasn't soft again, but neither was it hard. Just dreary. "Neither of us want Mirth to grow up to be called that Braley kid the Waldron girl raised." Silently she started packing Mirth's things.

HE'D DRIVEN three miles, the golden-haired little girl beside him chattering and clapping her hands at the novelty of the ride, when Monty reined the team around. The horses were dark with sweat when he stopped them again at Lu's cabin. From a distance he had seen Lu throw down a pack saddle by her doorway and carry its panniers inside. They were half-filled when Monty strode into the cabin with sleeping-bag, camp kit, overalls! Lu was going away! Back to contest riding, from the evidence of bright shirts and other show gear. To California maybe, where they held rodeos in winter. Lu, on her knees, did not look up nor pause but he could see her lips twisting. Monty caught her shoulders, made her look at him.

"Lu," he said and his breathing was heavy, "whether you'll believe it or not—I love you! I've loved you since I first saw you on that black devil of a horse at Grande Butte. Lu—will you marry me?"

Her eyes dilated. Then their brows leveled, their depths flashed. "No!" she threw back. "No! You're blind. You're pigheaded. I—I hate you! Go 'way!"

She twisted free, but faced him. Her breast heaved. He had never dreamed she could be so beautiful! But he could only obey the command in her stormy eyes. "Tell your brothers I'm dropping the charge against Hurd," he found himself saying to no purpose. And then he was driving away again, with Mirth still clapping her small hands.

The childish joy didn't last. "You're a naughty girl," Mrs. Haught said when Mirth wouldn't eat her supper. "Spoiled!" she told Monty when the child cried after she had been put to bed. "Aun'y Lu, Aun'y Lu!" came from the room that had been Dale's, with a lonely little sob.

Monty was late with his roundup and

was down in the broken country by the river next morning, while the dull sky was still streaked with red. He had sent Fagin and his two other hands to Stirrup Creek. He found a few cattle quickly, and then no more. So it was only a little after noon when he came with what he had toward the ranch. Mrs. Haught, on a knoll above the house, was waving at him frantically when he first saw her.

"She was only out of my sight a minute! Playing in the yard!" the stout woman gasped. "Yes, Mirth. She's gone! I'm sure the gate was locked. Who would have dreamed that tiny child would run away!"

Mrs. Haught had never been on a horse. Monty knew it was a wonder she, too, hadn't become lost. He took her to the house and from there took up the hunt. He thought of going for the men he'd sent to Stirrup Creek to help him. But the clouds were lower, the wind had a ragged edge. He might waste all that remained of precious daylight hunting them.

AS HE swung in wider but fruitless circles Monty's heart seemed to wedge in the base of his throat. And a driving need rose in him, as it had in the little girl. For Lu! But Lu was going—or had gone—away. Could Lu have taken Mirth with her?

The gnawing grew on him. He changed horses and rode, neck or nothing, to the Waldron place. Lu hadn't gone yet. His approach nearly stampeded the horses that stood by her cabin. They were Lu's clean-limbed chestnut, two pack horses—and Long Fagin's roan. Fagin and Lu were throwing the diamond hitch on the backs.

Mirth wasn't there. And by the way the color drained from Lu's face as he told her, Monty was sure she'd known nothing about it till now.

Lu rode straight to her brothers' shanty. Len and Duke were sleeping, for they hadn't come from Grande Butte till after daylight. She cuffed them awake, ordered them to saddle and follow her. "Shut up and come on, too," she told Fagin, who had started to grumble. "Mirth's lost! And it's going to snow!"

Whatever his failings, Monty had good horses. The one he was riding kept near Lu's all the way back to the Wagon Wheel. Fagin's fell behind. And Fagin didn't come up with them when Lu and Monty started again to comb out each poplar clump, each coulee, in widening circles around the ranch. Neither did Len and Duke appear.

"Mirth couldn't have gone far," protested Monty. "She's so little!"

"You don't know her—how strong she is!" Lu whipped back. "No one knows what any person can do when it's lost and scared."

The searchers reached a ridge between two valleys and knew there wasn't time before dark to scour both of them. "*This* valley," said Lu, unhesitatingly. Then, moving on ahead of them, Monty saw two men and a herd of cattle. Lu, he supposed, had seen them first, had made her choice on that account. Or could Lu feel her way? He had unlimited faith in Lu and the love he now knew she had for that little girl. The men were moving away from the Wagon Wheel. Still Monty didn't think but that they were the men Fagin took to Stirrup Creek. They'd help in the hunt.

Instead they lashed the cattle to a run, then opened fire on Lu and Monty. Savagely Monty's six-shooter replied to silence the guns before they hit Lu!

Monty could always recognize men by the way they sat horses. The thought flashed through his mind that this must be Len and Duke, vengefully running off a herd of his cattle while they knew he would be hunting the baby. Then that thought died as he recognized Long Fagin. But the other rider—that slim figure with the wide shoulders who sat a little to one side on his horse—that could be only Port Braley! Braley, who had killed Ross Waldron and who, to save his own skin, had left his injured young wife and run away!

BRALEY'S bullet numbed Monty's left arm but it didn't numb his brain. Here Port was, still haunting the valley of the Saskatchewan where he'd thrown away his chance of success and happiness. Living by stealing the cattle he didn't dare claim openly! Could it be that Port, warped by his bitterness at both Monty and the

Waldrons, was the source of so much mysterious trouble between them? And Fagin was in cahoots with him! And had meant to drag Lu, who was numbed by hurt, into helping with the haul of this big herd. Before he took her away.

All this flashed to Monty before he fired the last shot in his pistol. He saw Port lurch forward, then catch himself and straighten from his horse's neck. Drawn by the shots, two more riders raced over a ridge ahead of the cattle. These, Monty saw, *were* Len and Duke, coming at last to join the hunt. Braley and Fagin, seeing themselves in a trap, tried to shoot their way on through it. The hawk-eyed Waldrons gave back better than they got. Port, then Fagin, pitched to the ground.

Turned back by the slamming of the guns in front of them, the now thoroughly stampeded cattle rushed down the slope toward Lu and Monty. But that danger wasn't what made Monty stare. For out of a poplar clump the rumbling of approaching hooves drove a little, frightened creature. Monty's wits were entangled still with Port and Fagin. Lu's cry cut them like a whip.

"There she is! Mirth!"

All that man and horseflesh could combine to do to cover ground Monty did with his lean iron-grey. But Lu's chestnut was nearer. She swung in front of the cattle, but in the same direction. Monty tried desperately to veer the herd but he had emptied his six-shooter and his yells had no effect. The baby had fallen down, of course.

There wasn't a whisper of time for Lu to stop. Monty saw her swing down on the side of her horse, holding herself by a spur against the cantle of her saddle. He saw her catch Mirth in both hands. Saw her wrench to raise herself. She couldn't!

He couldn't know the fire that seemed streaking through Lu's side. Mirth was a sturdy little weight, and it was more than two years since Lu had done trick riding. Monty knew only that she hung there, head down. Her horse raced on, over badger holes and rocks! Behind them thundered the cattle.

If will or prayer or spur could make his horse run faster, it was one or all of them that brought Monty's horse alongside Lu's. He leaned down and lifted her, in spite of the tearing where Port's bullet had raked his arm. Mirth was still tight in Lu's grasp. Guiding by knee, he swung his horse out from in front of the herd and stopped.

Monty thought it was the thunder of hoofs that still beat in his ears. But finally he knew it was the singing of his own blood. He was kissing Lu. They were both kissing little Mirth. And, wonder of dear wonders, Lu was kissing him!

Coming in the next issue

Across the Border

Beginning a Stirring New Serial

By CLEE WOODS

The Rio Grande

The History of a Famous River

By LEWIS NORDYKE

Cupid Cuts a Fence

A Story of a Determined Cowboy

By S. OMAR BARKER

BORN WILD

By Herbert A. Woodbury

BECAUSE HE couldn't keep a promise for twelve months, Rick's girl decided she couldn't take a chance on a lifetime

THE town hadn't changed. Getting out of the stage in front of the post office and letting his glance travel the short, dusty block to Crystal Rock's main street, Rick Foster had the feeling that this was yesterday.

But the sharp stab of pain brought him up short. Yesterday, twelve long months ago when he had said good-by to the town, Marka Eaton had been here at his side. He had felt the strength of Marka's arms about him and the warmth of Marka's lips on his lips as she had told him:

"Of course I believe in you, Rick. If you say you're going to change, you *will* change!"

Today, heavy as a stone above Rick's heart, was the weight of Marka's letter in the breast pocket of his levi jacket:

"I told you, Rick, that if you couldn't keep your promise, you needn't come back. And apparently you haven't kept it."

There was an early morning chill in the little canyon through which the town's main street knifed its way. The sun hadn't yet risen above the saw-toothed ridge of the Elkhorn Mountains to the northeast. A cold dampness rose from the creek under the cottonwoods. But for the second Rick felt only the boiling heat of his anger.

His rage was not directed against her, but against Craig Warren. This was Craig's work, he knew. Craig had run into him that night over the line in Wyoming. Craig, looking sober and dignified in his pressed blue serge suit, had stepped up to the green-baize table where Rick had just risked—and lost—two hundred dollars trying to bluff his way through a pot on a pair of sixes. The rancher from back home in Crystal Rock had watched him for a second, and then said:

"Still throwin' it high, wide and handsome—huh, cowboy?"

Rick had met the cool, level grey eyes of Craig Warren defiantly. He had told the cowman curtly, "I've stayed out at the Pothook for twelve months, Craig. Mailed my wages back home to Crystal Rock, and they're on deposit there in the bank. This is a little extra money I happened to win this afternoon—bronc-ridin' at the show at Dixon. If I want to play around with it, whose business is it?"

The older man, he recalled, had darted a swift meaningful glance at the empty glass at his side. "And I suppose that's water you're drinkin'?"

A hot flame of indignation had suffused Rick's lean,tanned face. "Supposin' it ain't water? I been drinkin' nothin' but water for twelve long months."

Craig had looked him over in his calm, supercilious way. Then the cowman had turned away from him. "You know what you're doin' I guess, pardner. But does Marka know?" . . . .

Now, Rick squared his broad shoulders and crossed Main Street toward the Eagle Buffet. Tall and lank, he had the flat-

hipped, rangy build of the born top rider. And when a man was born to ride broncs—the worst ones and the wildest ones—what was there in it for him, punching cattle at forty bucks a month? Rick had earned big money in his time. Before he had met Marka. And had learned to enjoy spending it. And then he had been going to change. And he *had* changed! Only. . . .

He thrust through the swinging doors of the Eagle and Tony Espinoza, the bartender, greeted him. "Well, if it ain't the old boy himself."

"Me," he acknowledged.

"Had a good year up there in Wyomin'?"

He met Tony's eyes, levelly and boldly. "Good enough." And it *had* been, he thought. Until the night when Craig had seen him. He watched Tony set a bottle and a short squat glass in front of him, and he shook his head.

"I'm off the stuff, Tony."

Tony's lips smirked faintly. "I'd heard different, pardner."

Managing a tight, thin little smile, Rick constrained himself. He had nice blue eyes, earnest and boyish when the glint of anger died in them. "Rumors," he said gently, "get exaggerated. Especially, maybe, when they're bein' spread by—Who told you about it, Tony? Craig?"

Tony made the elaborate pretense of wiping an imaginary spot of moisture from the bar before he lifted his glance and met the challenge in Rick's eyes. Then he said explosively, "And if it *was* Craig? Then what? You might try puttin' yourself in his shoes, Rick. He thought he was going to marry Marka Eaton till you blowed in here and made a grandstand hero of yourself."

Rick counted slowly to ten and let the moment dissolve into nothingness. Low on his left hip, he felt the weight of his heavy holster, but he was saving the gun in the holster for Craig. Grandstand hero! She'd have been dragged and battered that day, if he hadn't stopped her horse! And

"You just don't belong in a tame little Sunday School town like Crystal Rock"

Craig had stood there like a dumb, stupid jellyfish.

"And who brought Marka into this?" he asked.

Tony looked levelly back at him. "My mistake," he said. "I've knowed a lot worse than you in my time. And liked 'em. Good-time Charleys. Swell fellows, Only. . . ."

"Only?"

"They had sense enough to keep away from women like Marka. That's where you made your mistake. Not in travelin' with the wild bunch, but in tryin' to stop travelin' with 'em. Ain't nothin' wrong with you. You jest don't belong here in a tame little Sunday School town like Crystal Rock."

Tony grinned. Rick stood there for the moment, pondering it. Maybe Tony was right, he thought. But it wasn't that easy. No other girl had ever even faintly stirred him. Along with his wildness, there was this unholy contradiction in him, he thought. He liked his men gay and two-fisted and boisterous, but he wanted his women. . . . Women? He felt a sudden little rush of ache and pain. *Women*—in the plural—wasn't the word he wanted.

For a tiny minute he had a vision of lodge-pole pines along a lake. Fiddler's music from the pavillion a little way off. Marka and himself strolling down the sandy strand while Craig, who had brought her to the dance, fumed and searched for her in vain. And what had he told her?

"I need you, Marka. *He* don't. He's the kind that could be happy with any one of a thousand good women. But I ain't built like that. There's only one woman in the world can ever make me happy. It's you, darling."

He roused himself slowly from his mood. He asked Tony, "Craig Warren out to the river ranch? Or the J?"

And Tony looked back at him, hard. "You might try findin' out for yourself."

RICK came out of the Eagle and walked down the short, shabby block. Painted on wrapping paper and posted in front of the *Sentinel* office, a bulletin blared at him:

SLATER STAGE LOOTED
BANDITS BELIEVED TRAPPED
IN WILD HORSE BASIN

And the bulletin somehow gave him a little lift. The wild bunch! There were people who still believed he'd ridden with them, believed he'd drawn no line in his search for a gay time.

His holster gently thumping against his leg, he turned in at the livery stable. And Ben Moss apologized for the tiny gray nag that he rented to him.

"Posse's got all my good horses, Rick."

He gave Ben a quiet little grin. "Anything that's got four legs and can move will do. I ain't in no hurry." Nor was he, he told himself. Craig could wait. As a matter of fact if he could undo the damage Craig had done, maybe he'd let him off scott-free.

The trail out of Crystal Rock took him away from the creek and the green fields, the cottonwoods and the willows. Low hills rolled ahead of him in silver and purple sage. He forded Dry River at last in the noonday heat, and came up the clay bluff through the alders and the feathery burro weed into the tiny fenced yard where a slab cabin stood. A water wheel, grinding away in the river, poured a thin trickle of liquid silver through a wooden flume. In a tiny patch of baked vegetable garden, a slender young girl in a pink dress was hard at work with a spade and an irrigating tarpaulin.

Rick called to her, "Marka!"

She turned. Afterward he guessed that he might as well have wheeled his horse and ridden back toward Crystal Rock. For there was a level firmness in the two grey eyes that met his imploring gaze. She smoothed the windblown hair from her high forehead and stood erect and statue-like and unmoving.

"Then you didn't get my letter, Rick?"

He swung slowly down from his horse. "I got it, Marka. But I wanted. . . . I dunno what Craig told you. He said, maybe, I was drunk. Is that what he said?" She didn't answer, and he plunged on. "I wasn't drunk, Marka. Will you believe that, as a start?"

THE expression on her face didn't change, and it should have warned him. But he took hope momentarily from her words:

"I believe that, Rick. I never saw you when you couldn't hold whatever you had. I wasn't ever afraid that you'd be the sort of creature that some men are. I just asked you to give it up because it was part of the rest of the picture. Part of imagining that you were a millionaire. Of refusing to settle down and take a dull task seriously."

He stood where he was, by his horse, without approaching her yet. "And the row," he said. "The ruckus and the jail sentence. I didn't start the fight, Marka. The other guy did. Called me a name. I should have got off. In any other town, I would have. But I made the mistake of breakin' the nose of a man who was brother-in-law to the constable. So they threw the book at me. Thirty days in jail and two hundred dollars fine."

He brightened suddenly. "But at that I didn't need to touch the little nest egg I had put away in the bank here. I kept *that* promise, Marka. I earned five hundred dollars the hard way."

"And then broke it, the afternoon you came to Dixon."

"Only because. . . ." Confidently, he started toward her. He had overcome her fears in the past, hadn't he? In the very beginning? And afterward, those occasional Saturday afternoons when he had slipped from grace at Tony's place in Crystal Rock. "Only," he said, "I was tired and let-down and needed a lift, Marka. Twelve months, holed up clear out there back of beyond, was a pretty long, lonesome time."

"You had me, didn't you, to think of?"

She still hadn't moved. She didn't retreat as he came up to her. He took her in his arms, but her body was firm and unyielding, and she turned her head when he tried to kiss her. "If twelve months was too long to keep a promise, Rick," she asked him, "then how did you figure on keeping one a lifetime? What was it you told me the last time? When you said it *was* the last time?"

He said it in all sober seriousness. And he meant it, he felt, this time. "But it's different now, Marka. I've learned my lesson. Your letter—you never said before that we were through."

The calm expression in her grey eyes still didn't change. He couldn't rouse her, he saw suddenly, even to anger. She told him quietly, "I never meant it before."

"But you meant it, this time?"

Something in the grey eyes softened for a second in a sort of faint tenderness. But tenderness and pity weren't surrender. "I meant it this time, Rick. I love you, I guess. But I'm past letting love blind me. I know now that I can't change you."

She gestured to the tiny, baked garden, the little slab cabin, the rolling hills of sage. "Any of this," she said, "is too drab and too tame for you. You want the bright lights, Rick, and excitement. I don't think you're greedy. You don't love money the way some men love it—to keep it and hold onto it and hide it away. But you've got to have it pouring through your fingers. You couldn't—" she picked up the spade and tossed a clod of earth to block an irrigation row which had filled with water— "do this all day, day after day. Could you?"

He had followed the splash of the clod with his glance. On both sides of the frail trickle of water grew a pathetic line of pale, anemic, bug-ridden cabbages. Rick felt something within him suddenly explode. "And could you," he asked her angrily, "be happy hoein' cabbages the rest of your life?"

A beauty that was almost ethereal shone suddenly in her tanned cheeks and her grey eyes. "I could have been, Rick. When I gave up Craig Warren for you, this is what I was choosing, wasn't it?"

HE LOOKED away quickly as a swift rush of emotion choked and all but strangled him. Somehow, he thought, he hadn't ever looked at it this way, before. He had loved her; he had wanted her and needed her; and the whole story had ended there. But in accepting him, he saw suddenly, she had given up plenty.

Craig Warren wasn't some poor nester calling himself a cattleman because he happened to own a handful of poor miserable cattle. You could count Craig's herds

on his river ranch and the J by the thousands. And Craig's new venture, the trading company which he had recently organized, was literally minting money for him.

Rick stood there a second, smothered by a sense of guilt. And he had expected her to give up all that Craig might have given her—for *him*? He had not only expected it, but not given it a passing thought. And he had offered her what in return? He thought for the minute of what Tony had said to him. "I've knowed a lot like you, Rick. Swell fellows. Only they had sense enough to stay away from women like Marka Eaton."

Something roused deep down in Rick. He'd hate Craig Warren, he guessed, until his dying day. He'd have hated the calm, ice-cold, mechanically efficient cowman, even if Craig Warren hadn't been the bearer of tales to Marka. His type, warm—hot-headed maybe and impulsive—and Craig's type—shrewd and calculating and business-like—simply didn't mix. But his personal feelings toward Craig were beside the point.

Slowly and deliberately Rick bent down and untied the leather thong which bound the tip end of his holster to his leg. Just as deliberately he reached behind himself and unbuckled the whole heavy harness of cartridge belt and gun.

"Maybe," he turned back to Marka, "you'll keep this for me for a little while."

Two startled grey eyes asked a question. But he didn't need to tell her in so many words: "I've changed my mind about killin' a man. And just to make sure that I keep this promise, I'm gettin' rid of my gun." He told her lightly, instead. "Holster chafes my hip as I ride. And I got a long, hot ride ahead of me, I guess. Good-by, Marka."

The grey eyes followed him over to his horse, but she still didn't move. "Good-by, Rick. And good luck."

RICK had skirted Wild Horse Basin on a wide arc as he had ridden out of Crystal Rock that morning. Elementary caution had prompted him to avoid an area alive with a trigger-nervous posse. But as he rode back to town deeply absorbed in his thoughts, he unconsciously gave his pony his head, and the horse instinctively took the shorter trail.

Rick blundered into a thicket of alders along Wolf Creek, his thoughts a million miles from the bulletin in front of the *Sentinel* office. And the pale, pinched little hombre who had watched every foot of his approach for the past quarter-mile had him covered before he could move.

"'Light down quiet, pardner!"

Rick froze in his saddle. The dull, blue barrel of a heavy .44 pointed at his heart. Quietly and obediently, he stepped down. Out of the brush came a second man to take his pony by the reins. In quiet amusement they looked him over. "You ain't very well heeled, pardner."

Rick shook his head. The second man examined his horse. "Nor ridin' a very powerful nag, either. Where'd you get that flea-bitten crowbait?"

Rick said nothing. The man glared at him angrily. "We figgered, seein' you comin', that you was bringin' us a fresh horse."

The second man said dryly, "But now there's nothin' to do, I guess, except look into that slab cabin over there. Like we planned, to begin with." He came in toward Rick, gun uplifted. Springing, Rick caught a descending arm. Lifting a blow from his boot-tops, he drove it to the man's midriff. But the second man, armed with a carbine, brought that carbine swinging.... When Rick awoke, the sun hung just on the border of the golden horizon.

It took hours, it seemed to drag himself to his knees and crawl to the pool. But the ice-cold water of the deep green pool restored in him a measure of life. He managed to stagger out, upright. Slab cabin, he thought.... If they had simply rounded up a couple of the horses grazing in the little pasture behind the cabin and then had ridden on, it wasn't so bad. But he had a sinking feeling as he thought of the gun which he had left in Marka's charge. What if, armed with a gun, she had tried to fend them off?

He climbed out of the brush in the creek and up the steep clay bank. Reeling like a drunken man, he started back the five—

or was it nearer eight?—long miles across country. The sun slipped into oblivion in the west. The gold left the clouds, and stars pierced the gray. But a light, twinkling in the window of a slab cabin, finally beckoned him and gave him hope.

Slipping between two strands of barbed wire, he made his way across the cabbage rows to the side of the house. Clutching the window-frame, he held himself steady long enough for a glimpse into the tiny kitchen. And then for an endless, hazy eternity nothing quite focused.

There were four people in the room—Marka and Craig Warren and the two men from Wolf Creek. Marka sat in a rocker. Craig and the bandits were grouped around the table. For the minute all that Rick could piece together was this much: Some time after he had left Marka, Craig Warren must have ridden in. Craig, now that he had disposed of Rick as a rival, was probably a frequent caller these days at the little slab cabin. But if Craig had been there when the bandits had arrived, why hadn't he done something? He must have been armed.

And then Rick started. *Must* have been? Why, the man *was* armed! He had his blue-serge coat thrown back, and under his left arm-pit the bulk of a shoulder holster and the tip end of a gun were exposed! For a second the scene danced before Rick's dazed eyes. And then eerily and from very far off, he heard a man's voice through the cracked pane.

Not Craig's voice, but the voice of the man who had swung the carbine at him. "There you are, pardner." The man seemed to be addressing Craig Warren. "We been over it a thousand times, and it all comes back to where we started. You've explained it to the gal, and she won't see it your way."

STILL in his daze, Rick clung to the window-frame. He saw Craig Warren turn and survey Marka. The cowman's face was composed as if he were addressing a stockholders' meeting of his new trading company. Trading company? Rick suddenly saw the light. . . .

"All this," came Craig Warren's even voice, "is most unfortunate, Marka. I should have thought faster, I guess. When Shorty and Slim rode in, I shouldn't have given them the chance to hail me as a friend. I should have started shooting and silenced them."

"Been silenced yourself, you mean, pardner," put in the tall, thin one who must have been Slim. "I've a picture of you drawin' fast enough to get either one of us. You got brains. We'll all of us hand it to you there. You're able enough to sell gold bullion through your tradin' company. But you didn't draw because you knowed better."

Craig Warren seemed to ignore the interruption. "Most unfortunate," he repeated to Marka, "but there you have it. I'm unmasked, if you want to put it that way. You hold my fate in the hollow of your hand. Or, as Slim puts it, we hold yours in the hollow of ours. So for the last time, Marka, let's be sensible."

From the arm chair, Rick heard Marka's voice. "Sensible! You think I'd marry a man who—"

Craig Warren leaned back in his chair. And a wave of ironic horror gripped Rick. Where his gun was now, he didn't know. Probably Marka had brought it into the house and put it away. But if he only hadn't given it to her, he thought! If he had simply persevered in his first, grim intention! From where he stood he could have drilled Craig neatly between the shoulders. Yes, and cut down both the other two before either man could have moved. He heard Craig's voice float out to him:

"Many a woman, Marka, has forgiven the sins of the man she loved. Or, even failing to forgive them, has managed to abide by the hard code of necessity. Put it that way if you like. You're shocked, disillusioned. But is it any worse than with Rick? I know another man that let you down. But you gave him one more chance, didn't you?"

Rick put his hand up across his throbbing forehead. He could have told Craig Warren his answer, without waiting for Marka to tell it. Sure—she had given him his one chance, but no more! And he thanked God that she was like that! Firm

and immovable and unshakeable in her convictions! Without even the cunning or the guile to pretend to acquiesce to Craig Warren's demands. For she could have pretended, he thought. Agreed to go to town to be married and then denounced him. But she was as innocent of deceit as she was of evil. Rick felt a calm coolness come over him, banishing the fever of his splitting head and aching body. A woman like that was worth dying for!

He staggered back from the window and the babble of voices. He tiptoed on around to the leanto, hardly expecting to find his gun. Nor did he find it. But he found a long,handled shovel with which she had been irrigating cabbages.

PAUSING for a split second, hand on the knob of the door which would admit him to the kitchen, he took a long, deep breath, breathed from the air about him the strength and the determination not to falter until he had seen this through to the finish. Then he swung the door open and charged, beserk!

Swinging the shovel, he caught Craig Warren first. With all the full leverage of the long handle, he brought the blade horizontally across the man's throat, and Craig, with a blank, bland expression of amazement upon his cool face, dropped like a poled steer. Only, Rick couldn't use the shovel a second time. Slim, with a bound, had it pinned to the floor and wrested from him. Shorty, it must have been, who fired at him, pointblank from close range. He felt his body explode. A leaping sheet of searing red engulfed him. But the blast of the explosion knocked him down beside where Craig Warren had fallen, and his arm fell across Craig's shoulder holster.

Craig's gun seemed light as he drew and lifted it. He had the vague, dull sensation of floating off like a balloon, into space. But if his body was insensate, his mind had never been clearer. Through the blinding red mist he saw the brighter, orange cone of flame leap from the gun which he had taken from Craig. He watched Shorty hurtle backward into space. Then he felt himself again lifted up and set down.

Rick rolled sideways, lifted his arm, and rested it across his body. He knew his finger squeezed the trigger. For, across from him, he saw Slim fall against the stove. He even saw Marka start toward him. But he didn't wait for her to reach him. He let his eyes close and allowed the blackness to sweep in about him.

NEITHER, for a while, would he listen to Marka's voice when he first heard it. The thick fumes of chloroform choked him. Through the yellow glare of lantern light, he dimly glimpsed a sea of faces about him—Doc Masterson, Rob Gilroy, the sheriff. Pretty near the whole posse who had come galloping up when they heard the shots. He simply looked dully from one man's face to another, and tried to avoid seeing Marka's tear-stained face or listening to her voice:

"Rick, come back to me! Do you hear me? Come back!"

He simply smiled to himself. And why should he come back? Because he'd been a grand-stand hero again? Heck, he'd been that kind of hero all his life. The physical bravery that it took to ride a bronc, or stop a runaway horse, wade into three armed men with a shovel—there had never been a time when he had been without bravery like that. It went with the wild recklessness with which he had been born.

He tried to tell her, "No, Marka."

And then he heard her sobbing, "Oh, Rick, I need you so desperately." And he suddenly thrust from himself the calm resignation with which he had been going to meet death. *She* needed *him*? There was something *he* could do for *her*? And not just, as it used to be, what she could do for him? Rick listened to her say it again, and made the effort to live.

There was something that some day he must make very clear to her. He wasn't coming back to life for the excitement of the applause that they would all surely give him. He was coming back, he thought, to hoe cabbages! The Lord knew he hated 'em! Meat and potatoes were a man's vittles. But if she took pride in their little kitchen garden, then so did he!

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1. A bronc-buster
7. Rodent
10. Sip liquid
11. A heathen god
12. Fly alone
13. A player in tag
14. Conclude
15. Water vapor
16. Pig pen
18. A narrow gorge
20. Hearing organ
22. A quick blow
23. An expression of inquiry
25. Wash the floor
27. Poker stake
28. Danish coin
29. Within
31. Women's short haircut
33. Woven meshed fabric
35. South Wales (Abbrev.)
36. Recent
37. Golf mound
38. Scatter seed
40. A male person
41. Honey-producing insect
43. Male cat
45. Olive drab (Abbrev.)
46. Goes into
48. Elongated fish
50. Make lace
51. Intention
52. A Chinese coin
53. A sheltered corner
55. Slash
57. Observe
58. Bashful
59. A gambling game

Solution to Second Dec. Puzzle

DOWN

1. A conspicuous hill
2. Upward
3. Sort
4. Kind of snake
5. Artificial language
6. Old Latin (Abbrev.)
7. Fish eggs
8. Wing
9. An Indian weapon
12. A pace
15. Framed tablets for writing
17. Sweet potato
19. Press clothes
21. Steal from
23. Bitter vetch
24. Flashy gamblers (Slang)
26. Mighty
30. Require
32. A red vegetable
34. Small child
39. Sorrow
41. Bill of a bird
42. Track
44. Affray
47. Location of a town
49. Sheltered side
50. Child's plaything
54. An exclamation of surprise
55. Therefore
56. Labor union (Abbrev.)
57. Saint (Abbrev.)

Dusty Wagons

By L. P. Holmes

THE STORY SO FAR:

Coming to the town of Capell with plans for his own freighting business on the Vaca Plains, GENE CUYLER finds there a fierce feud between the wagon men and the cattlemen, in spite of the fact that the farmers have wheat to be marketed in Sycamore. Operating only as individuals, the wagon men have no strength to fight their opposition successfully and are easily scared away. With the aid of an old wagon man, MIKE McKENNA, and through a loan from the town banker, PIERCE POMEROY, Cuyler buys up the wagons of the men who have been frightened away.

The night of his arrival in Capell, Gene breaks up a wrecking party led by tough BLAZE DOAN, CASS HUNTOON, and TEEDE HUNNEWELL, and urged on by a fiery blonde, CANDY LOFTUS. The stubborn leader of the cattle interests, Candy's father, BEN LOFTUS, warns Gene to leave town, but his niece, PAULA JUILLIARD, keeps the argument from becoming a fight. Later the wagon men are attacked and beaten, but the first load of wheat is hauled to Sycamore.

Gene is pursued by a group of gunfighters, but he escapes on Paula's horse. A fight follows, and one of the cattlemen is killed. One of the young wagon men, STEVE SEARS, falls in love with Candy, and dances with her at the cost of a fist fight with her escort, Blaze Doan. Gene suspects that Pomeroy has become his enemy because of jealousy over his attentions to Paula and greed for the profit on the freighting business. One of Gene's wagons, loaded with wheat, is drygulched and its driver, HACK DOUD, killed. The mules, the wagon and its wheat cargo fall to the canyon below.

PART THREE

HACK DOUD lay dead at the edge of the road, a tangled, crumpled figure, shot through the heart by a high power rifle bullet.

Gene Cuyler straightened up from examining the wrinkled, leathery old-timer and looked with bleak eyes at Bill Wragg, Steve Sears and the others, who had stopped their wagons and were hurrying up with ready rifles.

"I heard the shot," said Gene stonily. "Up on the ridge above. Whoever did it had it figured just right. They knew that Hack would be leaning into his brake strap, easing the wagon down this sharp pitch. They knew that when they dropped him and the brake went loose the wagon would roll out of control and go over the edge into

the canyon at the turn. They figured it fine and made a dead center shot. Poor old Hack—he never knew what hit him."

Bill Wragg cursed with helpless fury. Steve Sears snarled, "If we bust right up into that brush maybe we might get a crack at—"

Gene shook his head. "Not a chance, Steve. Whoever did this had it all figured and is on the move by this time. He may leave sign, and I'll have a look for that later on. Nothing you boys can do now but keep on rolling. Put Hack on the next wagon and take him to Sycamore. Make all the arrangements there and I'll foot the bill. Where's Mike Kenna? His wagon is generally rolling the lead."

"One of his wheelers busted a trace just short of the hills and he pulled out to let the rest of us by while he made the repair. He'll be along," said Bill Wragg. "Hack's outfit—do you think—?"

"I'll take a look at it," said Gene. "If there is anything to be salvaged, I'll tell Mike about it when he comes by. You boys get rolling."

The long column of mules and freighters rumbled through, and it seemed to Gene Cuyler that the merriness of the yoke bells had become a measured dirge, escorting a fallen warrior to his last rest. The last outfit past, Gene went down over the canyon edge to survey the wreckage.

The big Merivale was over a hundred feet down the canyon, wedged upside down in a thicket of tough, scrub oaks. Two of the wheels were smashed, spokes splintered, hubs split, felloes shattered, heavy iron tires bent and twisted. The reach was broken, the pole snapped short off. The body of the wagon was kindling wood.

Fat sacks of wheat were scattered in a wild cascade above and below the ruined wagon. Some of the sacks had burst open, spilling their golden contents everywhere. Yet it wasn't so much the sight of the wrecked wagon or the scattered wheat that put the bleak chill into Gene Cuyler's eyes. It was the thought of Hack Doud. And of the mules, poor, dumb, faithful critters—twelve of them . . .

It was a bitter, heart-rending business, but it had to be done in the name of mercy. Three of the mules, both wheelers and one of the pointers were dead. For the other nine there was no shred of hope—broken legs, twisted joints, crushed ribs.

CLIMBING over rocks, around knarled scrub oaks, and through clumps of manzanita and chemisal and toyon brush, Gene went along the mad tangle of chain, harness and doomed animals. Nine times did the hoarse, thudding bark of his .45 echo. Then, taut and white, Gene climbed back to the road. He was building a smoke with shaking fingers when Mike Kenna came rolling his outfit through.

When Gene told him of the tragedy, Mike let out a low, hoarse cry of anger. "What

dirty, black-hearted hound would do a thing like that? And it would have been me who got it instead of poor old Hack, if that trace hadn't busted and held me up for a spell. The wagon—the mules—?"

"Wagon is a complete loss and the mules all dead. On the return trip, Mike, have the boys stop and salvage what they can, like the chain and harness and other gear, along with what wheat they can where the sacks did not bust open."

"I'd ask only to get my bare hands on the dirty fiend!" gritted Mike.

"I'm going to see what I can do about that now," said Gene. "See you in Capell tomorrow afternoon."

It was a wilderness of brush on the main ridge. From any of a dozen places a man might have lain in wait to turn loose that treacherous shot. Gene spent a full hour on the ridge, fighting through the brush, searching for some sort of sign. It was like looking for the proverbial needle and with no more chance of success. Gene went back to his horse and headed for Capell.

Cuyler had no idea which way to turn to get a line on the killer of Hack Doud. Whether this was the opening move of a new attack by Hunnewell and Joe Justin, he could only guess. If it were, why would they have been content to drop just one of his skinners, wreck one outfit? For the loss of one man and one outfit, while it would hurt him and hurt him bad, still would not crush him completely, the logical end of the cattle interests. Yet, if it wasn't the cattle interests who were responsible, who else could it be? Who else could be secretly gunning for his hide—and why?

Matt Ivance, the gunman now riding for Teede Hunnewell? Ivance, whom he had helped run out of the Burney country, where Ivance was a killer on the wrong side of a timber war? Ivance hated Gene, had threatened vengeance. Yes, maybe it was Matt Ivance. Yet wouldn't Ivance prefer to see Gene Cuyler killed instead of one of his men?

PROWLING the town Gene found no challenge or argument anywhere. Capell was as quiet as he had ever seen it, with few people in evidence anywhere. Finally Gene went to the hotel, where he found Sam Reeves taking his usual licking from Pierce Pomeroy in their regular chess game. Sam Reeves was startled by the look on Gene's face.

"Something is biting you, friend," he said. "What is it?"

Gene pulled up a chair and told the story bluntly. Sam Reeves whistled softly and said, "That was a lousy trick. I could cheerfully pull on the rope that would swing the rat responsible for a thing of that sort."

Pierce Pomeroy's black eyes narrowed. "And here," he said. "A good man gone, a wagon and string of mules gone, too. That one shot cost you a chunk of money, Gene. Who would have been low enough to pull a trick like that?"

Gene shook his head slowly. "I don't know. Yeah, that shot cost me some money, all right. But I'm not thinking of that. I'm thinking of Hack Doud and twelve poor helpless mule critters. I saw them go over—right before my eyes. How they fought against the remorseless pull of that chain! Their eyes—!" His voice went hoarse and he scrubbed a hand across his eyes as though trying to wipe away the picture. He went on, "I'm going to come up with the rat responsible one of these days. When I do—!" He made a short, swift gesture, like he was wiping out something venomous.

"I know just how you feel," nodded Pomeroy. "Things like that put iron in a man's soul. You'll be replacing the lost outfit as soon as possible, I suppose?"

"Probably. This leaves me with sixteen wagons. If I had twenty-five I could still fill them with wheat."

"You've been doing a real job," said Pomeroy. "You've put new life into this stretch of country. If you locate more outfits you can buy, you know where to come for the money. In the meantime, I hope you come up with the damned dry-gulcher. If there is anything I can do to help, let me know."

Pierce Pomeroy seemed to have entirely forgotten the slight argument he and Gene had had over Steve Sears the night of the dance. He was at once affable and sympathetic. He said musingly, as Gene stood up and prepared to go to his room, "Hu-

man nature is a strange thing. There have been countless evidences of man's nobility, yet just as many of a depravity that would shame the devil himself."

"I dunno about that," said Sam Reeves. "But I do know that the more I think of that rotten business, the madder I get."

THE NEXT morning Gene's problem was still riding him grimly and would not let him be still. He saddled up and rode, heading nowhere in particular, just driven by the need of movement. Hours later he reached the low rounded hills to the east, where Ben Loftus had the drill rig set up and working.

A pair of ponies, hitched to the pole of the run-around, jogged their monotonous circle. The bull wheel of the rig spun ponderously and the drill cable jerked up and down, clanking. Ben Loftus threw up a welcoming hand as Gene came riding in.

"Down only thirty feet and into water already," cried Loftus triumphantly. "Sort of a pumice formation and just shot full of water. I'm going down another fifty feet and then put a pump test on it. I'll be satisfied with five hundred gallons an hour, but I got a hunch it will run twice that much. Mister, this is a well!"

Said Gene, "You talk the lingo as though you'd been at this business all your life."

"Been reading up on it ever since you pounded the idea into my head," admitted Loftus cheerfully. "Say, you got a look about you, Cuyler. Anything wrong?"

Gene told him. Loftus cursed harshly. "That's rotten! You got any idea who did it?"

"Not yet, but I expect to."

"Hunnewell, you think, or Justin? I haven't seen anything of them lately."

Gene shrugged. "No answer yet. It won't be pleasant when I find it."

A buckboard came rolling up from the flats. "Noon grub," said Loftus. "Paula said she would bring it out. Rest your saddle and eat with us, Cuyler."

It did not make a bit of difference, thought Gene, whether the girl was in a gingham house dress, in riding togs, in a dance frock or, as she was now, wearing a plain khaki skirt and blouse. She still took your breath away. As she pulled the buckboard to a halt, Paula gave Gene a bright, quick smile.

"Where's Candy?" asked Loftus. "Thought she'd be out, too."

Paula shrugged. "She saddled up and rode off a couple of hours ago."

Ben Loftus frowned but said no more about it.

They sat around a square of tarp spread on the ground, ate and talked well drilling and water and range and wheat farming. "Time will come when there will be wheat on every flat acre of the plains," said Loftus. "I've had that hunch for a long time but was just too pig-headed to admit it, even to myself. Now that I have, now that I've accepted the inevitable, damned if it ain't a big relief."

"There is a lot of good graze in a wheat field after the crop is harvested," said Gene. "I think you might find the wheat men ready to talk business with you on that angle, Ben. If you run short of grass during the fall months, think it over."

"You keep on and you'll have some of us cowmen and the wheat farmers friendly as chipmunks in a hollow log," grinned Loftus.

"Something I'd sure like to see," Gene admitted. "There is no percentage either way in a range war. After all, folks have to learn to live together in this world."

THE meal over, Loftus and his men got back to work. Gene helped Paula Juilliard gather up and stow the eating gear then jogged along beside the buckboard as the girl drove off. After a couple of hundred yards of silence, Paula said abruptly, "We've a great deal to thank you for, Gene—Uncle Ben and I. And Candy, too."

Startled, Gene said, "Why should you thank me for anything? Rather, I should thank you, again and again, for the things you've done for me and for bringing your Uncle Ben around to a better point of view."

"I couldn't have done that without you," Paula told him. "The idea of violence had me frightened to death all the time. Once there was a sheep and cattle war on these

plains. That war cost me my father, who was Uncle Ben's partner. I've never forgotten."

"So far, violence of some sort has ridden at my shoulder," Gene reminded. "And it's still there."

"I know," she nodded. "But your cause is right and constructive. You are working to bring everyone together as friends and good neighbors. You've convinced Uncle Ben, and for that I thank you greatly."

"You owe me nothing, Paula. You've already given me your friendship—which is the greatest thing in my life."

The warm color whipped her throat and cheeks and she would not look at him, but her lips were slightly parted and there was the look of an eager, happy child about her. A moment later she said soberly, "You must be very careful who you trust, Gene, who you accept as friend and advisor."

Gene stared at her keenly. "Who and what are you talking about?"

She shook her head. "I can't say more because I am not entirely sure. Once I am, I'll speak frankly."

At the ranch Paula left the buckboard and contents to the ranch cook and walked over to the ranch house with Gene beside her leading his horse. Her dark head came just even with the peak of his shoulder. She climbed a few of the porch steps and stood looking down at him, a faint, grave smile touching her lips.

Gene drew a deep breath and said, "That night in the hotel lobby, when you came in after the dance—had we been alone, I think I would have taken you in my arms."

The musing smile deepened. "I know. I could see it in your eyes. Had you tried it, Gene—I think I would have let you."

She was gone then, into the house, before he could move or speak another word.

Two miles back along the tail to town, Gene met up with two riders. Candy Loftus and Blaze Doan.

Candy flushed at Gene's glance then tossed her yellow head. Doan gave off a surly scowl. He still bore plenty of evidence of his fight with Steve Sears.

"You got an argument coming up with your Pa, Candy," Gene called after her. "He was expecting you out where he's well drilling. You'll run into that willow switch yet."

Candy tossed her head again and set spurs to her pony. Doan's scowl deepened, but he said nothing, hurrying after the speeding girl.

IT WAS HOT in the brush on top of the main ridge of the Brushy Hills. Gene Cuyler had been there since early morning. He had a rifle and a pair of field glasses borrowed from Gil Saltmarsh. He had found the highest eminence he could and had settled there in the grey chemisal and the ruddy barked manzanita. All day long he had waited and watched, and he had seen nothing except a couple of buzzards drifting high awing, some deer browsing, and once a scant glimpse of a day prowling coyote. There was no sign of a human, afoot or in the saddle.

He had heard his wagons coming, yoke bells singing in the distance. They passed below him, the sound faintly carrying back from the south and west as the wagons topped the pass and rolled on down into Sarco Valley. His vigil over, he sought his horse and rode back the long miles to Capell.

It was dusk when he got there. He turned his horse into the corrals, crossed to one of the watering troughs where water was splashing from a feed pipe. He drank deeply, took water in his cupped hands and scoured the dust and sweat from his face. He dampened his hair. The night wind felt cool and good brushing his face.

As he climbed out of the corral he stiffened, dropping a hand to his gun. Indistinct in the gloom was a rider, a rider who had come up quietly while Gene was at the trough, the splash of water filling his ears against other sound.

"Who is it?" rapped Gene harshly. "Looking for someone?"

"Yes—you," came the answer.

"Candy!" exclaimed Gene. "Candy Loftus! What brings you here, youngster?"

"Is—is Steve Sears around?"

"No. Sorry, but Steve is with the wagons down at Sycamore. What did you want to see him about?"

Candy was silent for a moment. Then

she said, her voice subdued, "I heard Dad telling about that wagon man of yours that —that was killed. It—it was pretty awful. I kept thinking how it—it might have been Steve—how it might still be Steve. I wanted Steve to know that I was—was glad he danced with me the other night. And that I don't—don't hate him like I said."

"If Steve had been here—would you have told him that, Candy?"

"Yes. I'd have told him."

Gene moved up beside her horse. "I'm apologizing for a lot of things I've said to you, Candy—of things I've thought. You're all right. The thoroughbred strain has been there all the time, just covered up in spots by thoughtlessness. Yes, you're all right, and I'm apologizing. Steve was right all the time about you when he said you were wonderful. I promise you that as far as I possibly can, I'll keep Steve away from trouble—without him knowing it. Shall we shake and be friends?"

She put out her little, warm hand. "Yes, we're friends."

She started off, pulled in a trifle. "You take mighty good care of yourself, Gene. For Paula's sake."

Then she was gone, flying through the night.

FOR THE next ten days Gene left the corrals and wagon yard only to eat and sleep. Through Gil Saltmarsh he had rounded up half a dozen men and had put them to work enlarging the corrals, repairing the old adobe building, building more feed racks and feed sheds and rigging up a derrick with which to stack the baled hay that was beginning to come in from Sarco Valley where Jess Petty was doing a good job of buying it up.

Gene wasn't forgetting Hack Doud and what had happened to him and the outfit he'd been riding when death and disaster struck. Each round trip to Sycamore and back, Gene laid up one wagon and team for a rest, revolving the procedure all down the line. He took Skeet Yore, the best rifle shot among the skinners, off the wagons completely. Each morning before dawn, Skeet rode away with rifle and field glass, to spend the day along the high ridges of the Brushy Hills above the road, watching for skulkers and with orders from Gene to shoot first and ask questions after. Each night Skeet returned to report all quiet and peaceful in the Brushies.

Wheat and more wheat moved out, a good thing for Gene, as the lumber and labor costs of repair and expansion and Jess Petty's pay for labor and hay kept his cash reserve at a minimum. He had to hold out enough to meet the interest of his bank loan, too.

Several times Pierce Pomeroy dropped around to survey the work with approval. "You got the right idea, Cuyler," he said. "To do a job right a man has to have the right tools, proper facilities. A haywire setup stays haywire, with no future. I can see the time ahead when thirty or forty outfits will be rolling in and out of Capell at the peak of the wheat harvest. Right now Capell is more prosperous than I have ever seen it—which means good business for everybody. If all this pinches you for ready cash," he waved an encompassing hand, "don't worry about the interest payments on that note. I'll just add it to the amount of the note and you can take care of it later when you've a reserve built up. If you see a chance to grab up more freight rigs, grab 'em and I'll foot the bill."

"Any luck so far on picking this property up at that tax sale?" Gene asked him.

Pomeroy nodded. "Going through the works right now. Not a thing for you to worry about there. Leave that to me."

Gene got Steve Sears alone one evening. "Lady friend of yours dropped around the other night, kid."

"What lady friend?" Steve was surprised.

"Candy Loftus."

"Candy! To see me?"

"That's right. I told her you were down at Sycamore."

"What did she want?" Steve was all eagerness.

"She wanted you to know that she was glad you danced with her and that she didn't mean a lot of mad things she'd said about you. Now that doesn't mean you're to hightail right out to the J L and take the little lady in your arms. But it's a

thought to keep you happy and a promise that the next time you run into Candy she won't throw rocks at you."

"Doggone!" glowed Steve. "Oh—doggone! She's wonderful, that girl."

DESPITE the fact that no further trouble had developed along the road across the Brushies and that night after night Skeet Yore rode in to report all quiet and peaceful along the high ridges, Gene had not dropped his purpose of eventually paying off for Hack Doud and the lost outfit. But it was a puzzling state of affairs. Just one isolated attack with no followthrough did not make sense. Gene was beginning to wonder if, after all, the whole thing wasn't the product of some private affair of Hack Doud's. Maybe someone had a grudge against old Hack.

A couple of nights later, Gene was at the store, talking with Gil Saltmarsh when Skeet Yore came quietly in. His nod drew Gene over to the door. "Somebody to see you, down at the corrals, Gene," murmured Skeet. "A lady."

"Lady? Candy Loftus?"

"No. Miss Juilliard."

Gene hurried to the corral, where Paula stood by her horse's head, a slim, tense figure in the starlight.

"Paula! Anything wrong?"

"It is something I feel you should know," she said, her voice low, but taut. "You remember that remark I made out at the ranch the other day about your being careful who you accepted as a friend and advisor? I told you then that once I knew more, I'd tell you."

"I remember," said Gene. "You know now?"

"Yes. Gene don't trust Pierce Pomeroy. Don't trust him an inch."

"Pierce Pomeroy! Why—Paula—!"

"I know," she nodded. "Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Gene, he's backing you, isn't he? With money, I mean? That night in the hotel, after the dance, when you and he had that little argument, I judged from his remarks that he had loaned you money. Am I right?"

"You're right. He loaned me the money to buy up five outfits. I had to put up all my outfits as collateral. But there is no real quarrel between us—"

"There is now," cut in Paula. "He hates you, Gene. I could see it in his eyes. It is one of the few things I've ever been able to read in those veiled eyes of his. He even covered that up quickly, but not before I had seen and understood."

GENE was honestly bewildered. He had figured from the first that Pomeroy was shrewd! And that in money matters he might be pretty cold and ruthless. Yet why should the banker hate him?

Gene said as much and Paula answered, "This isn't going to be easy for me to tell you, Gene, because it is going to make me seem pretty brazen. But it will have to be told if you are to understand fully—Pierce Pomeroy is jealous of you, Gene."

"Jealous? Of me? You mean, because of you?"

He saw her dark head nod. "Of me. He was out to the ranch today. He asked me to marry him. It was the third time he had asked. Before I was able to dodge the issue. Today he was insistent, even rough. I grew angry, told him what I really thought of him. That I detested him—that I'd always detested him. That was when he let the curtain of his eyes drop and for the first time since I've known him I was able to read some of his thoughts. One of them was that he hates you."

Gene reached for his smoking, began building a cigarette while he got his reasoning figured out. "He has visited you, Paula—you went to that dance with him. If you detested him—why?"

"Because," she said simply, "Uncle Ben owes him money. Always I've felt that he was holding that invisible club over my head. Today he admitted as much and said he was going to call the loan immediately. That's going to hurt Uncle Ben's plans for the future. I told Uncle Ben about it and he was wildly angry, not at me, but at Pomeroy. He said if Pomeroy ever set foot on our range again he'd shoot him on sight. But that isn't what I came to see you about. It's you and your affairs with Pomeroy. Gene—watch him!"

"Why should he be jealous of me, Paula?"

"That terrible night when Hunnewell and Justin and Matt Ivance were out to hunt you down and kill you, when we stood in the gloom close to the front of the hotel, Pierce Pomeroy was just inside the dark window behind us. He—he accused me of willingly standing there in your arms. He heard—what we said. He said he saw you—you kiss my hair. And that was when he began hating you. He even started to voice a threat against you, Gene—but caught himself in time. Now—you know."

She turned, swung into her saddle, reined away a trifle. In another moment she would be gone.

"Has he real cause to be jealous of me, Paula?"

"There was never a time when I did not detest Pierce Pomeroy. But—I rode here tonight to tell you, didn't I?" And with this rather enigmatic answer, Paula Juilliard whisked away into the dark.

PIERCE POMEROY and Sam Reeves were playing chess. There was a soiled, much thumbed paper lying on a nearby chair and Gene seated himself and apparently buried himself in reading. He covertly studied the banker and wondered if it was imagination, stimulated by what Paula Juilliard had told him, which made him for the first time read into Pomeroy's absorption a hard intentness, like a wolf waiting for the leap and the kill.

Maybe it wasn't imagination for abruptly Pomeroy made a move and rapped out, "Checkmate!"

"Doggone you, Pierce," wailed Sam Reeves. "You don't waste no time knockin' a man's brains out, first chance you get."

"I play to win," said the banker curtly. "If you don't play to win, it is no contest, no interest."

"Set 'em up again," said Reeves. "I'll try and make you sweat this time."

A half hour drifted by. Gene stirred, yawned and put the paper down. Pomeroy half-turned in his chair. "Got any line at all on that drygulcher yet, Cuyler?" he asked tersely.

Gene shook his head. "Not yet. But he's due for a wild surprise if he tries it again. I ain't been advertising it, but I got a man lying in wait on every high point along the Brushies and anybody caught prowling that country better have a damn good excuse if he wants to go on living."

Gene stood up, started for his room, but stopped as he heard Sam Reeves give a yelp of delight. "Checkmate! Ha! That makes us even, Pierce. You left yourself wide open with that move and I got you nailed to the mast!"

Gene looked at Pomeroy. The banker was staring at the board, a dark, angry flush on his face. He stood up and said thinly, "Right! I walked into that one, Reeves. That's enough for tonight."

Pomeroy left the hotel without another word. Gene looked at Sam Reeves and murmured, "Doesn't lose very well, does he?"

"You know," said Reeves soberly, "I been playing chess with Pierce a long time. I've seen him make wrong moves before, but never a careless one like that. Wonder what bit him all of a sudden?"

GENE SHRUGGED, said nothing. But as he spun another cigarette into shape, a cool, speculative gleam was in his eye. He moved out onto the porch, sidled along to the darkest end, tossed his cigarette aside without lighting it, dropped off the end of the porch and stared down the street.

He saw Pierce Pomeroy's striding figure blend and disappear into the blackness of an alley on the far side of the street. Gene crossed over, listened, heard steps dying out at the far end of the alley. Gene loosened his gun slightly in the holster and went through the alley.

Beyond was the sprawled outskirts of the town. A dim light shone murkily from the window of one shack. Gene saw a shadowed figure drift past this window, then vanish into the dark bulk of the cabin.

Gene circled, came up on the dark side of the cabin, edged around a corner and up to the window. A lamp with a badly sooted chimney stood on a table and there was a bunk against the far wall of the place. Standing beside the table was Pierce Pom-

eroy, the murky lamp laying a light cast across his face that gave him a Machiavellian look. Half sitting, half lounging on the untidy bunk, whiskey glass in hand, was Hitch Gower!

Gene could not make out what was being said between the two, but he did not care. For his thoughts were snapping and crackling now like a string of fire-crackers. He was remembering that Pierce Pomeroy had been on hand the day he had fired Gower for drunkenness. A man as shrewd as Pomeroy would be quick to reason that Gower would carry a grudge against Gene and would certainly be open to a proposition to do him dirt.

Then again, Hack Doud had been killed at a spot where, with his wagon running wild, it was sure to go off the grade into the canyon. A man who had skinned an outfit across the Brushies would know the place and the consequences. And Hitch Gower was an ex-skinner, who knew every inch of the road between Capell and Sycamore. It was adding up—fast! The only gap in the picture was why Pomeroy would order such a thing done.

It was hardly possible that Pomeroy would have had anything against Hack Doud personally, anything that would cause him to want Doud killed. No, that move had been a blow against Gene—the loss of a wagon and string of mules he could not afford to lose. That Doud had to be killed to bring this about was only incidental. Yet it had been the money Pomeroy had loaned Gene that had bought that freight outfit. Would Pomeroy deliberately throw away his own money? If so—why?

Jealousy, perhaps? Paula Juilliard had told Gene that Pomeroy was jealous of him. To what lengths would Pomeroy go to satisfy his hate, his jealousy? It was hard to tell what went on in the mind of a man like Pierce Pomeroy, he was so darkly secretive. Yet Gene was sure that jealousy wasn't all the answer.

Money? That was what Pierce Pomeroy dealt in. Yet how could he make money by ordering destroyed a wagon and mules that represented money—his money loaned to Gene? Unless—!

IN A SUDDEN flash of understanding, Gene had the answer. The conviction that in the end the wheat farmers of the Vaca Plains would emerge victors in their battle with the cattle interests was one big reason Gene had come to Capell in the first place, determined to set up his freighting business. There was wheat to haul, there would always be wheat to haul, and in ever increasing quantities. A soundly established freight business was bound to develop into a valuable and profitable business.

Pierce Pomeroy, shrewd as he was, would have that figured out, too. He had seen the first influx of the wheat farmers, seen them dig in and hold on to their first acreage, then stubbornly increase it despite the cattle interest opposition. He could see the inevitable triumph of the wheat farmer. He had also seen the cattle interests driving out the little one wagon freighter.

Then Gene had come along, with the sound idea of a large number of wagons, working out of Capell under one management, hauling as a unit, fighting as a unit, if need be. Pomeroy could see the soundness of such an idea, was quick to loan money to back it up. But in doing so, he had forced Gene to mortgage every wagon and every string of mules to him. Pomeroy would stand back and let Gene make the fight against the cattle interests, make it and win it. Then he would step in and take over.

To do that he would have to see that Gene did not get far enough ahead with earned revenue to pay back the loan. To do that it was necessary to keep Gene turning back that earned revenue into the business. A wagon and string of mules destroyed was one means of doing that. Encouraging Gene to put effort and money into repairing and enlarging the property about the wagon camp, was another. Yes, he would let Gene make the fight and win it, let him build up that profitable freight business, then step in and call the note and, with Gene unable to pay it at the moment, take over. And if Gene, in some final showdown with the cattle interests, should be killed, Pomeroy still held chattel mortgages on all the wagons and mules and other

gear. If, in this whole scheme to use Gene and break him, Pomeroy could satisfy a hate engendered by jealousy, so much more satisfaction for him.

Yes, there it was—the whole deal. A case game, if there ever was one. No matter what happened, Pomeroy could hardly lose. Ben Loftus owed Pomeroy money. Probably Hunnewell did, too, and Justin. Maybe Jim Nickerson and the other wheat farmers also were in debt to Pomeroy.

Sitting back, watching the entire struggle with those black, unreadable eyes, Pierce Pomeroy was in a position to move with the winning side, gouge his pound of flesh from the losers and end up on top.

WHILE HE thought these answers out, Gene had never taken his eyes from the two men in the cabin. There had been argument back and forth between them, heated argument. Now Gene saw Pomeroy pull a thick roll of bills from his pocket and slam it down on the table and Hitch Gower catch up the money with greedy hands. Pomeroy abruptly turned, walked to the cabin door and opened it.

Gene flattened against the side of the cabin, where the gloom lay thick. He heard the door close and saw the shadowy figure of Pomeroy merge with the dark as the banker headed back for the center of town. Gene let him get well away before edging up to the window for another look.

Hitch Gower was counting the money Pomeroy had given him, licking a dirty thumb as he turned over the bills, one by one. He pocketed the money, drained the whiskey bottle, tossed it in a corner, began getting gear together. Presently Gower blew out the light and left the cabin.

Gene followed him, soft and intent. Gower headed away from town, came to a little, ramshackle corral, from which he led a horse and began saddling it. Gower was half-drunk, careless. Gene got within two strides of him before the horse, tossing a restless head, warned Gower. Gower whirled heavily, grabbing for a gun. He was too late. Gene gunwhipped him solidly and Hitch Gower, grunting like a poleaxed hog, went down in a heap.

JIM NICKERSON said, "I got the place. A special storeroom I had built to store my first seed wheat. I'd sent clear to Kansas for that seed wheat and paid a whopping price for it. So, while holding it for the planting, I put it in this storeroom where there wasn't a chance for a mouse or a rat to get to it. If it kept four-legged rats out, it ought to keep a two-legged rat in. Bring him along."

Nickerson lighted a lantern and led the way to the storeroom, Gene Cuyler coming behind, pushing a sick and groggy Hitch Gower ahead of him. Nickerson tossed a roll of old blankets on the floor, brought a bucket of clean water. Between them, he and Gene went through Gower's pockets carefully to make sure he had no matches. Then they locked him in.

"I'll see that he's fed regular, Gene," said Nickerson. "And nobody will know he's there but you and me."

"I'm sending a letter off tonight to U. S. Deputy Marshal Cade Booker," said Gene. "A good man and a friend of mine. I saw how he worked up around Burney with some lumbering trouble they had there. He's the man to wrap the string around Pierce Pomeroy. We'll hold Hitch Gower until Booker shows up, then let him take over from there."

"Whatever you say," Nickerson nodded. "Gower will keep."

Gene rode back to Capell through the pale light of an early morning moon. He put his weary horse away and then, in his room, wrote a brief letter before turning in himself.

When Gene came out of the Elite after breakfast the next morning a buckboard and a heavy farm wagon were pulled up in front of the store. The buckboard looked familiar, so Gene went over. A couple of farm hands, lugging a spool of barbed wire between them, came out to the wagon, skidded their burden into the vehicle, went back for more. Gene followed them in and knew the swift, warming lilt to his pulse as he saw Paula Juilliard standing at the far end of the counter.

Her grave, small smile was waiting for him as he came up to her, hat in hand. But also in her eyes was a shadow of nervous-

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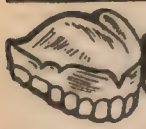

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ness. "Something is wrong, Paula?" Gene asked gently.

She shrugged. "Uncle Ben is finding out what his past friendship with Teede Hunnewell and Joe Justin really amounted to. They've driven in a lot of cattle to the hills around where Uncle Ben just finished getting his first well drilled, the mill working and the watering troughs full. Uncle Ben is furious. He told them he hadn't gone to the expense and work of putting down that well to water Looped H or Broken Bow cattle. Hunnewell and Justin merely laughed at him and said that now there was good water as well as good grass in the eastern hills they intended to get their share of it. There isn't a thing Uncle Ben can do about it, of course. He can't keep a man at the troughs day and night to see that only JL cattle drink there.

SO JOE JUSTIN is around again, eh?" drawled Gene thoughtfully.

"Yes. He can't walk very well, but he can ride. Gene, you've had no more trouble, with Pomeroy?"

Gene shook his head. "I expect I'll be able to handle Pomeroy. Drive that worry from your lovely eyes, girl. Everything will work out all right." He went on, softly, "So often we meet in some public place where I can't say all I'd like to say to you. And other times you never wait and give me a chance. But there will come a day, Paula Juilliard, when there won't be others around or where you can't run, and when you'll have to stand and listen. And then you and I will have an accounting, a very dear accounting."

For a long moment they stood there, looking at each other and a tender smile lay warm on the girl's red lips.

Gil Saltmarsh's voice broke in on the magic moment. "Hey, Gene, you got any idea what this is?"

Gil came over, the two farm hands following. Gil had something in his hand. He held it out. It was a small lump of something, wrapped in heavy, damp paper. "Smells like matches," said Gil.

Gene took a look, his eyes narrowing.

"Where did you get this?" he rapped.

One of the farm hands answered. "Tom Walsh gave it to Huff and me when we drove out the main gate of the ranch, on our way to town after barbed wire."

"Where did Walsh get it?"

"Damn—er, excuse me, miss. Darndest thing you ever heard of. Tom Walsh stood gate guard last night. About an hour before dawn this morning Tom hears a rider coming along the road. Tom gets down in his guard hole so he could get a line on this rider against the stars and the light of a late moon. Tom figured the guy was either drunk or crazy. For as he rode along it looked like he was chucking rocks. Tom said every so often this jigger would stand up in his stirrups and chuck a rock. One of 'em lit in the standing wheat just back of Tom's guard hole. The guy just kept right on riding and Tom didn't let on he'd heard or seen anything. But soon as it got light enough, Tom started looking around. He found this little chunk of stuff wrapped in wet paper. It didn't make sense to him, and when Huff and me drove out on our way to town he asked us. We didn't know either, so we put it in the jockey box to bring along and ask Gil. Mebbe it's something that'll poison the wheat, huh?"

Gene's voice was harsh and strained. "It's worse than poison. It's fire! This is phosphorus. While it is kept wet this way it is inert. Once the sun dries it out sufficiently, it begins to flame. I saw it used in a timber fight up around Burney. Matt Ivance had a hand in that dirty business there. Now he's brought the idea down here. Lord help the wheat farmers! Their fields of ripe wheat will be in flames before this day is over. Maybe even now—!"

PAULA JUILLIARD gave a cry of dismay, ran to the store door, stared off in the direction of Jim Nickerson's ranch. She turned and called to Gene. "No sign of smoke yet. We'll take the buckboard. Maybe we can warn Nickerson and the other farmers in time—Quick!"

Paula was up, had the reins as Gene untied the team. She kicked off the brake and

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had the rig in a skidding, scrambling turn and Gene hit the seat beside her.

They tore along through the morning sunshine, staring ahead with straining eyes, dreading what they might see. The first gust of flame, the first lifting coil of smoke. But as the straining ponies ate up the miles to Jim Nickerson's main gate, the threat had not materialized. The gate guard recognized Gene and let them through, asking, "What's the rush about? What's—?"

Paula swung her whip on the team and left the guard open mouthed and perplexed as the jouncing buckboard tore on toward the ranch buildings, where Nickerson and several farm hands were busy about a big machine, oiling and adjusting, getting it ready for the harvesting chore ahead. Nickerson stepped out to meet the buckboard, wiping his hands on a greasy rag.

"Now what's wrong?" he boomed.

Gene told him, curtly blunt. "You've not a second of time to waste, Jim. Get mowing machines out to cut fire lanes through the wheat. Get water barrels out, wet sacks, hoes, shovels. Get every man you have—except one to carry the warning to Pettibone and the others. No time to argue or explain further, Jim. I know what I'm talking about. I know how this phosphorus works. The sun is getting hotter by the minute. Move, man—move!"

Jim Nickerson read correctly the desperate urgency in Gene Cuyler's voice, in the strained intensity about his eyes. The big rancher whirled and began roaring orders. Men raced for the corrals. Horses were caught and harnessed at furious speed. Two teams were hooked up to mowing machines and Nickerson yelled at the drivers. "Cut a double swathe the whole length of the fields, parallel with the road and about a hundred yards in from the edge. Fast!"

The mowing machines, on cleated iron wheels, clanked and rattled away. Other men harnessed horses to a farm wagon. Barrels were loaded on, filled with water. Armfuls of empty grain sacks were piled in, shovels and hoes brought. Gene and Paula climbed on as the wagon rumbled away, the driver urging the team to a run.

DUSTY WAGONS

Hanging on desperately, Paula cried, pointing, "Look! Smoke!"

AT THE EDGE of the wheat next to the road, some quarter of a mile north of the main gate, the dreaded haze was lifting, pale grey at first, then darkening swiftly, above the first bright tongue of flame.

Jim Nickerson groaned aloud. "There she goes! This can turn into a hell!"

Within the space of minutes, Jim Nickerson's prophecy was perilously close to fact. Along the entire edge of the huge field, facing the road, flame sprang up in a score of places and began eating into the precious wheat. Smoke billowed in sooty banners, staining the sky. The flames spread, fast and wicked.

A guard, seeing the first flame spring up, started for it and had not gone ten yards before another spike of flame leaped up beside him. He ran to this, tried to stamp it out, heard a crackling behind him, whirled and saw more flame there—and there—and there—!

Paula stood in the hurrying wagon, wet to the waist by the water from the open barrels. She clung to a barrel with one hand, and to Gene Cuyler with the other. The wagon turned into the double swathe cut by the mowing machines, out ahead and already near hidden in the drifting smoke, blades whirring urgently. At Nickerson's shouted orders, men began dropping off the wagons, bundles of water soaked sacks in their hands.

"Backfire!" yelled Nickerson. "Backfire, and beat it out in the short stubble!"

Men ran along the east side of the cut swathe, scratching matches, touching off fresh gusts of flame. They raked back the cut grain in the swathes and beat out with wet sacks any flame that tried to creep treacherously across the short stubble and get at the standing grain behind. They forced their fire to burn out to the east and meet the oncoming line of fire.

Gene Cuyler joined these men, with Paula Juilliard close beside him lugging wet sacks. Gene lit backfires and together

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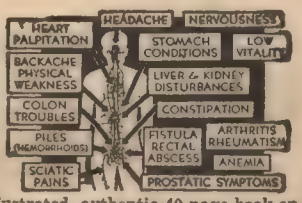

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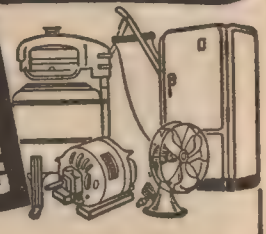

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they fought the flame away from the short stubble.

The smoke thickened to a bitter, sooty, choking pall and the heat took on savage force and impact. No precious breath was wasted in words. In the distance, only Jim Nickerson's big voice was roaring, directing the fight, but soon even this was smothered under the crescendo of flame.

Sweat streaming down Gene's face turned the shirt across his shoulders black and wet. Smoke choked his lungs, lay in them like some intolerable weight. This same physical distress, he knew, was Paula's, and the knowledge hurt him.

Her glorious, shining hair had loosened and now fell about her face and shoulders, but she paid it no attention as she flailed valiantly away with her wet sack. A cinder whirled out of the smoke, struck her hair and clung. Gene slapped it out, went on.

Full well he knew the danger that leered at them. Should the treacherous flames sneak across that cut stubble and get behind them, they could very well be trapped and roasted to a crisp. This was more than merely fighting fire. This had become a fight for life.

Once, in that choking pall of smoke he lost sight of Paula. Quick fear twisted his heart, and he ran back, calling hoarsely.

He found her where she had gone back to beat out a creeping line of flame that had crawled almost half way across the short stubble. In his relief he pulled her close to him. "Don't leave me, Paula," he mumbled thickly. "Not ever!"

There was a dry sob in her voice. "I won't, Gene. Not—ever!"

THE HEAT grew ghastly. Gene crouched as low as he could and still keep his feet. Even so it seemed he could feel his skin crisping and shriveling. There was live flame right ahead and a huge figure in the smoke, swinging a sack savagely. It was Nickerson, and the rancher was snarling and mumbling, fighting as though against something alive.

They met, and the rancher croaked hoarsely. "Go back the way you came,

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while I go north. Think we got it—think we've licked it. But make sure—of every inch—!"

The heat seemed slightly less, now that the backfire had burned its way to the east, already meeting in some places the flames advancing from that direction. And when they met, the flames towered high, like malignant demons struggling in death throes, voicing a thwarted fury in one final, seething roar. Then they dwindled and fell and left only smoke and black ash.

Gene had an arm about Paula, supporting and guiding her. They met a blackened and scorched farmhand who gave them a canteen of water. At the edge of the wide road Paula sank down, whimpering like an exhausted child. Gene made her drink from the canteen then gulped a mouthful or two himself.

He knelt beside Paula, untied her neckerchief, soaked it with water, put a finger under her soft little chin, tipped her face up and began gently washing away the soot and grime and tears.

"Smile at me," he murmured. "Just a little, while I wash your dirty little face. It's over and we've whipped it. And you're the sweetest, bravest, gamest—"

"I'm n-not," she whimpered. "I'm sc-scared to death. I've been sc-scared into fits, right from the first. And I can't help b-bawling—"

Jim Nickerson came along, making a personal inspection of every foot of the blackened fire line. He was scorched, blistered, sooted from head to toe. Those few ferocious moments had carved deep lines about his mouth, hollowed his eyes.

"The girl—she's all right? Not hurt or burned?"

"She's all right," Gene told him. "Just a mite tuckered out, that's all."

"A grand girl. Between the two of you, Gene—bringing me the warning, then helping fight the flames back, you've just about saved my skin."

Gene waved an arm toward the south. "Pettibone and the others—not so lucky, Jim."

Nickerson stared at the rolling clouds of

INVENTORS

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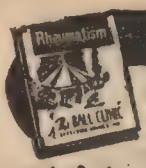

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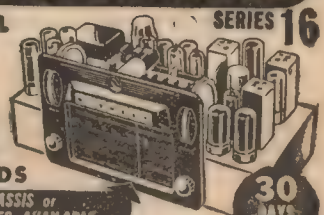

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smoke lifting from fields further south.

His big voice thinned with a chilled anger. "The dirty whelps! They want to make it this kind of a fight, eh? All right, this is the way it will be from now on! I'll carry the fight to them. I'll shoot them on sight. Yeah, if this is the way they want it, this is the way they'll get it!"

A buckboard came racing along the main road, stopped at the gate. A long shout lifted. Gene stared through the thinning smoke. "Gil Saltmarsh!" he exclaimed.

Paula had quieted now and Gene helped her to her feet as Gil Saltmarsh brought his buckboard skidding to a halt beside them. Gil's face was grim.

"Let's have it, Gil," rapped Gene.

"It's bad," said Saltmarsh. "This isn't the only place things are burning. Back at town your stacked hay and corrals are going up, Gene. Sam Reeves and other men in town are doing the best they can, but when I left to try and locate you, it didn't look as if anything could be saved."

(To be concluded)

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 39

1. Walnut wood, cedar wood, mother of pearl, ivory, hard rubber, plastic.
2. Colorado.
3. So cattle can eat the edible joints of the cactus.
4. Lodge
5. A white or cream-colored horse with unpigmented blue or bluish white eyes, called "glass eyes."
6. Canned goods, usually corn, tomatoes, peaches or milk.
7. Hanging on to the saddle horn.
8. Dough-wrangler, dough-puncher, dough-belly, dough-roller, dough-boxer, dough-herder.
9. Dallas, Texas.
10. (1) Ford. (2) Crosby. (3) Essex.

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WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

IT'S NOW Admiral John Guthrie, folks. Gov. Dwight Griswold of Nebraska decided John did such a swell job furnishing the stock and directing the arena at the Columbus, Nebr., rodeo that he commissioned him an admiral in the Nebraska navy. There's no water to speak of in Nebraska, so John needn't worry about being seasick.

Winners at Columbus were Vern Wittacker in calf-roping, Claude Fletcher in bulldogging, Wayne Louks in saddle bronc-riding, Ken Hargis in wild bull-riding, and Don Hines in bareback bronc-riding.

The Tom Packs rodeo in St. Louis reports a gate that sounds like a ball game —over $300,000. Called the Roy Rogers Championship Rodeo and put on by the JE Ranch outfit, it featured Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, Roy's leading woman in horse operas. It was a fast-moving rodeo and the crowds liked it.

Then along comes Puyallup, Wash., to report a total gate of 404,224 people at $1 a head, which beats the St. Louis show. The local radio station, KMO, broadcast every performance and put on a rodeo quiz at the rodeo grounds daily. The stock was furnished by the famous Christiansen Brothers of Eugene, Ore. Cy Tallion MCed in grand style, and Gene Payne took over the mike for rodeo events. A lot of the credit for the success of this rodeo should go to Bob Sconce, the publicity director.

Winners at Puyallup were Stub Bartlemay in saddle bronc-riding, Sonny Tureman in both bareback bronc-riding and bull-riding, Dan Poore in calf-roping, Dee Hinton in steer-wrestling and Freddie Marchand in the wild horse race. After this rodeo was over Bartleman, Tureman, and some of the other boys flew east to compete at Madison Square Garden. Warner Bros., shot technicolor pictures of the Puyallup rodeo to be released this winter.

St. Joseph, Mo., has recently held a swell show, the best they ever had, they report, with a clear sky and plenty of rough, tough stock. One of the highlights was Orville Brown, a local wrestler who decided to try dogging a steer. He didn't like coming out of the chutes on his horse and chasing after the steer with a hazer at his side. So, since this wasn't a contest, he was allowed to grab onto the steer's horns in the chute and come out with the animal. Brown tried all the tricks of the wrestling game, but had a real tussle before he finally threw the steer. Though the fans enjoyed the stunt, Brown says he'll let the cowboys throw the steers from now on.

The 18th annual Southwestern Livestock Show has announced its rodeo dates—March 25th through the 30th at El Paso, Texas. . . . Harry Rowell, who furnished the stock for the Cow Palace rodeo in Frisco this November, believes that show ranks along with Madison Square Garden. . . . Larry Sunbrock is flying to Colombia, South America, to set up a string of six rodeos in that country, and he's inviting native cowboys to compete against Americans.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

EDITOR'S NOTE: This page is composed of original cartoons, verse or prose pertaining to the West and written by amateurs only. For each contribution published we pay $2.00, and more than one contribution may be submitted by any person. Each contribution MUST be the original work of the person submitting it. Address: The Amateur Page, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. No submissions will be returned nor can we enter into correspondence about them.

Ghost Town

THE GHOST town lies below a barren hill,
Forsaken homes along each crumbling street,
No echoing sound of voices, pick or drill
Recalls the past where timeless hearts still beat.
Far toward the hills, in easy flight, a bird
Above its rotting roofs seeks fresher climes.
Lazy burros doze in shade undisturbed
Beneath the sagging church tower's silent chimes.
But there are stories told along the countryside
Of strange, uncanny happenings all through the night—
Of pack mules' tinkling bells, of gay songs far and wide,
And every window-pane ablaze with eerie light.
And strangers passing here at break of day
Have seen white ghostly shadows steal away.

Joan Austin Stubbs, Albuquerque, N. Mex.

All I Want

A PAINTED ranch house, not large, not small,
Nice and warm inside,
A little barn and in the stall
A gold-colored horse to ride.
A bubbling brook running by
A grove of leafy trees,
And when the cool of evening's nigh,
A little laughing breeze.
The warm, sweet-smelling earth, and above,
Millions of stars in the sky,
These are the things I cherish and love,
With them let me live and die.

Nick Kozmeniuk, Edmonton, Canada

Thunderstorm

STREAKS of lightning from a darkened sky,
Bewildered animals fleeing by,
Longhorns standing with lowered heads,
Lop-eared rabbits in sagebrush beds,
Frightened colts by mothers stand,
Huddled in a shivering band,
Thaws of rain and swirling wind
Causing each tree and bush to bend,
Fading clouds and a pale blue sky
Tell that the storm has drifted by.

Edward Everett, Colquitt, Ga.

Rangeland Beauty

WHEN I'M feelin' sort of dreary
And the world don't seem just right,
I saddle up my pinto and I ride out through the night.
For there's somethin' mighty soothin'
Out alone beneath the stars
With the rangeland wind a-croonin'
Through the sweet prairie flowers.
Yonder mountain top is frosted
With a glowin' golden light
From the big full moon that's risin'
To bring beauty to the night.
Far away a coyote's singin'
Comes a-ridin' on the breeze,
And the weary little dogies
Lie a-restin' and at ease.
All is still and calm and quiet,
Nothin's out of tune but me.
An' I sort of get to thinkin'
As I slowly ride along,
'Bout this rangeland's quiet beauty,
All the blessin's that are mine,
An' my troubles sort of vanish
In the beauty of the night.
For there's something mighty soothin'
Just to ride in deep moonlight.

Anne Lincoln, Santa Paula, Calif.

Cowpoke Distemper

YOU CAN shoot up a cowhand's best bedroll,
Sell him out clean with his boss,
Chop up his bootjacks and call it a joke,
But jest don't try cussin' his hoss.

She may be a stringy-tailed mustang
You wouldn't let hump up your seat,
A critter so high strung and bony
You'd swear couldn't stand on her feet.

But when she's some waddie's mount, you're a goner
If ridicule shows in your eyes.
She's one gal a cowpoke goes out fer,
Though he's got just one life, pard, he'll die.

It's a sort of distemper that comes with range dust
And the lone runs the hoss and him's seen,
The fights they've been through, and the jaunts that they knew,
That'll turn him deliberate mean.

Alice Bankert, Denver, Colo.

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Call Me Eddie

Dear Editor:

Pray tell me, who would like to correspond with a blue-eyed, 150 pound, red-haired, 5 ft. 9 in. private in the United States Marine Corps who is doing occupational duty in Kokura, Kyushu, Japan? This 26 year old Marine with 8 years in the Corps can write a lot of sea stories about Hawaii, Guam, Manila, Villa LaVilla, Choisuel, Bouganville, Japan, and points anywhere. This ex-paratrooper, with a lot of time on his hands, respectfully requests that someone help him spend this time by sending him a lot of letters to answer. Can do?

PVT. EDWARD L. DRAKE, 268022
Wpns. Co., 6th Regt.
2nd Mar. Div., c/o F.P.O.
San Francisco, Calif.

P.S. Just call me "Eddie".

Carol's in Washington State

Dear Editor:

I am very interested in having a few pen pals. I live in Washington State near the longest beach in the world, 28 miles of straight speedway. I am 18, 5' 4" tall, have "dish-water" blond hair and blue eyes. We have many natural foods near us, oysters, clams, crabs, cranberries and many others. My main hobby is dancing. I like music and all outdoor sports. I will exchange snapshots.

CAROL BILODEAU

P. O. Box 82
Nahcotta, Wash.

Four Soldiers in the MEF

Dear Editor:

We have been reading your magazine for sometime now and have decided that we should like some pen friends in the United States. So we have written this letter hoping you will publish our names in RANCH ROMANCES. There are four of us here in M.E.F. who wish to write and we have enclosed our names and addresses. As servicemen will tell you, mail mean a lot to us, especially out here in the East, where all men do is hang around just waiting to get out of the Army.

14823962 PTE. "EDDIE" KNIGHT
20 yrs., 5' 8"
14445495 PTE. "GERALD" MC HUGH
19 yrs., 5' 9"
14823947 PTE. "LARRY" WOODS
20 yrs., 5' 11"
14824304 PTE. "JACK" LYONS
20 yrs., 5' 10"

H. Q. Coy 2 Battn.
Lincolnshire Regt.
Middle East Forces, England

A Michigan Gal's Plea

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of your magazine for several years and think it's tops! Here's hoping you will rope a Michigan gal's plea in the pen pal section. I'm 17 years old, am 5'1", weigh 118, have long dark hair and dark eyes. I have oodles of hobbies. Hillbilly and Western music is strictly for me. I'm a lover of horses and do love to ride. So come on, you-all, make yourself a "true-blue" pal. I'll answer all letters promptly will also exchange pictures. So let's hear from you pronto.

BERNICE KANTZ

6054 S. Wayne Rd.
Wayne, Mich.

Sig's Now Out of Uniform

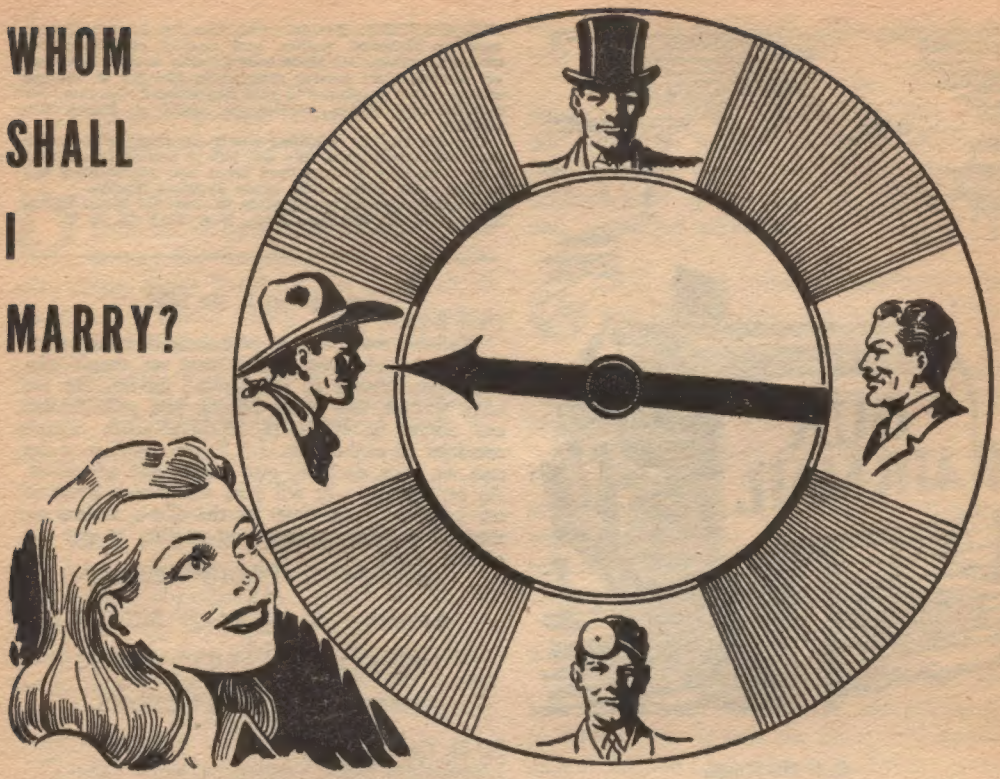
Dear Editor:

For the last 4 years while I was in uniform, I tried my best to get my plea for pen pals into "R.R." but without success. Now that I can show a private address again I hope you will find some space and print this letter. I am 23 years of age, 6 ft. 2" in height, have brown hair and weigh 175 lbs. My hobbies are writing and receiving letters, collecting stamps and driving motor cars, if there is enough petrol about. So come on, girls and boys, and threw some ink this way.

SIG WEBER

17 Rotten Row
Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, South Africa

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?



By Professor Marcus Mari

The Girl of Capricorn ***December 21—January 21***

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Your live sense of obligation to your fellowman, plus your gentle tolerance, makes you a particularly valuable citizen of today's atomic world. You are certain to make an understanding wife, a devoted mother and an excellent neighbor.

Do not worry if you feel you are somewhat shy or too quiet. That is one of your charms. Learn, however, to express your constructive ideas and mix with people—all types of people—in order to broaden both your life and theirs. You will find your association with others a most rewarding experience.

Your natural grace and charm will stand you in good stead in both romance and a career. You have a talent for making others feel at ease. If you will remember this, then you too will always feel at ease. Don't let anyone urge you into decisions against your own fine, good sense. Your own heart knows best.

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IN ONLY 15 MINUTES A DAY I can put a handsome, rippling coat of muscle all over your body! *Wishing* for superhuman strength and red-blooded vigor won't GIVE them to you. You may be sick and tired of letting other, huskier fellows "lord it over you"—but until you're willing to DO something about it, you'll never get anywhere!

But if you'll give *me* just FIFTEEN MINUTES A DAY—I'LL PROVE I CAN BUILD YOU A POWERFUL NEW BODY! I can make you feel so *strong* and *alive* you'll laugh at fatigue! Let me give you a battering-ram punch, develop your shoulders and back into a tough wall of solid muscle, build you a tough, supple belt of punch-proof stomach muscles, re-make your legs into young "tree trunks" of strength and flexibility. Let me pump *real HE-MAN power* into every part of your body—INSIDE AND OUTSIDE! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home!—is all I ask. And there's no cost if I fail.

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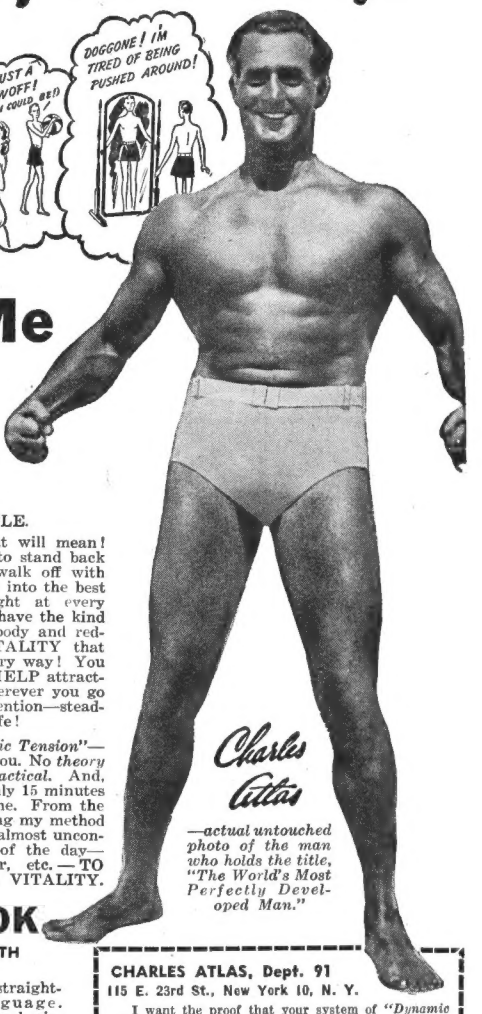

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